

JOHN DETH

AND OTHER POEMS

CONRAD AIKEN



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JOHN DETH AND OTHER POEMS

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CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

JOHN DETH
AND OTHER POEMS

JOHN DETH
A METAPHYSICAL LEGEND
AND OTHER POEMS

BY
CONRAD AIKEN

NEW YORK
CHARLES SCRIBNER'S SONS

1930

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FOR
JOHN AND JANE
AND LOOKOUT COTTAGE

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JOHN DETH
AND OTHER POEMS

JOHN DETH
A METAPHYSICAL LEGEND

I: THE STAR-TREE INN

I

John Deth and his doxies came to town.
 By the weeping-cross they sank them down.
 They were in rags, in rags was he.
 A branch of blossom, across his knee,
 Spun, in the drifting smoke of the moon,
 A hawthorn sweetness. It was June.
 "Go now, you, Millicent Piggistaile,"
 Said Deth, "to find an inn, and ale.
 You,—Juliana Goatibed,—
 Carve the black rock, and rest your head.
 This night, with Millicent I lie;
 You, like the mind, once more put by.
 Hurry! and at the Star-Tree tavern
 Rouse the musicians; have the seven
 Fiddles playing, and devil's drum,
 To jig to . . . Tell them that I come."

2

Then, in the smoke of the moonlight, rose
 Bitter of mouth and weary, those
 Tall gypsies: she whose eyes were flame,
 And she who bore the shameful name:
 The golden-haired, who loved her lord,
 And the dark demon, who abhorred.

3

Pat-patter went they; and the moon
Dipped in a cloud and they were gone.
And Deth, with chin in palm, sat on,
Staring; and in his musing saw
The crablike moon thrust out a claw,
Wave at a sea-weed cloud, and swim
In a blue pool; then dive and dim.

3

Above the churchyard wall he leaned.
Under a wet stone, lichen-greened,
The cricket sang. How slept they now,—
Madeline, of the golden brow;
Elaine, whose eyes were swift to speak;
And Petronilla, of satin cheek?
The laughing mouth, the greedy hand—
What found they now? Deth raised his wand,
And held its flowers above the dead.
“Take this—and this—and this—” he said;
With each quick hiss a blossom fell
Softly in moonlight, slow and pale,
Upon the dark ungarnered grass;
And lo: each grave became of glass;
Each coffin was of crystal bright;
Wherein glowed sadly a blue light.

4

“Elaine, how sleep you? Madeline,
 Where works the worm whose name is sin?
 What dreams hard Petronilla, there,
 Under her cobweb tent of hair?”

He leaned, he stared, he laughed a little.
 Bare under glass the bones lay brittle,
 The bones lay mute; but at his word
 In the queer light they loosely stirred;
 The jointed fingers clenched and turned;
 The deep eye-sockets filmed and burned;
 Over black rib and pelvis went
 A flush of breathing color, blent
 Of pearl and Shiraz, fiery mesh,
 Dim heart, and insubstantial flesh;
 And Petronilla touched her hair;
 And Madeline opened eyes, to stare
 Upward, beneath the coffin-pane;
 And softly, betwixt the two, Elaine
 Woke, weeping . . . “Ah! you remember—wake
 Once more—to anguish—for my sake? . . .
 You’d live once more, to dance with me,—
 To kiss my claw,—to feel my knee? . . .
 Sleep, now! but at the stroke of ten
 Run to the Star-Tree Inn again:

You'll have, before this night is past,
Your one dance more; but this the last."
He leaned, he stared, he laughed a little.
There under glass the bones lay brittle,
Lay still; and softly died the light
That made those coffins greenly bright.

5

Under the moon the yard lay dark,
With tilted moss-grown stones, to mark
Where slept in earth his weeping slaves:
~~A wilderness of rusted graves.~~
He twirled his wand. He limped, he moved
Beyond the lych-gate, loathed and loved.
St. Mary's laboring clock he saw;
Measuring hard the double law
~~Of life and death; life and death;~~
~~Dust and breath; dust and breath.~~
This too would end; would sink and pass,
Like other dead things, under grass.
The choirs, humming in candle-light,
Stirring carved aisles with scented white,
Would pace, with golden books, away;
And the stone tower be sunk in clay.
Darkly dreaming, he caused to fall

6

One pebble from the rotting wall.
He felt it strike, in his deep brain;
And shrank, as one who shrinks from pain.

6

And turning, so, he heard begin,
On throbbing air, a violin
Prelusive; then a ticking drum. . . .
"So! the musicians now have come,
And I must hurry; they wait for me. . . .
Be healed now, ancient foot and knee!
Be strong and young, poor bird-claw hand,
And fit to hold this youthful wand! . . .
Heart, be heartless! . . . Dropping rags,
Be burning satin! . . . You, my hags,
Be queens for me, your wretched king!
God hides his eyes behind a wing."
And stately then, and wrapped in flame,
King Deth before the tavern came
And angrily smote the hated door
Beneath the magic sign that bore
The bright-eyed Tree, whose branches shone
With winking star and staring moon.
"Come now," he cried, "and bid me in,—
All you who groan at life and sin!

7

Queen Millicent, and Parson Prude!
Queen Juliana, and Doctor Lewd!—
You, Farmer Trufit! with your dame
And silly son and daughter lame!—
You, Gardy Finch, with your two girls
Whose small white necks are crisp with curls. . . .
Open the door! For John Deth comes
To beat his feet to the beating drums.”

7

Then, as the Inn door opened, he
Proud as a god stept merrily
With golden feet and wand of thorn,
Dark ivy fringing eyes of scorn.
Barlyng, the Host, before him stood,
Ruddy Silenus carved of wood,
His ringed hands plump upon his paunch.
“Welcome!” he sang, “a friend so staunch!
Come in, and sing, and dance, and drink,
And, if you like” (a watery wink)
“Make love, among the trilling glasses
To our poor simpering country lasses!
Take whom you will! Be welcomed, lord!
By Barlyng, your old host, a bawd.”
The girl-faced flute-player tipped his flute;

8

And while the rout stood chilled and mute,
Blew across it a gleeful note
Like rainy eve in blackbird's throat;
And straight the dancers seemed to float,
Beating the air with feet like wings:
The fiddlers struck the buzzing strings,
And sang, and nodded polished skulls,
While round them frolicked the frumps and trulls.
The Bishop passed them with a caper,
Waving aloft a learnèd paper.
Behind him tripped the sad-eyed vicar
Who beamed on Millicent, the liquor
Seething his blood to frothy ichor.
"Come, Millicent, my spangled queen!
Come thump your shivering tambourine—
And dance me to the realm unseen!"
But Millicent gave his arm a shove:
"No, no! it's not the dead I love!
This youth I'll take; his lips are sweet;
I'll ripen him for a winding-sheet;
I'll wrap him for the Paraclete!"
He kicked the drummer's brass a clang,
And swore. Queen Juliana sang
With far-fixed eyes, red thumbs on hips,
Treading a measure, while her lips

Grew savage; and then led away
Into the dark, to kiss and play,
Old Farmer Trufit's gaping son,
The smiling simple-hearted one.
"My Lord," the rosy Bishop cried,
"Take me! Long since I should have died!
And in this treatise I have read
That flesh, corrupt, no sooner dead,
Grows up in beauty like a flower!"
"Bide, then," said Deth, "until that hour."
"But I am tired, and I would die!
Be merciful, and let me lie
In earth, among your blessed host,
Forgetful of the Holy Ghost.
When slower the thin blood flows
Than sap in brown November rose;—
The house of life a dwindling storm
Of sunset clouds, and not so warm—
When ice creeps over heart and eye—
What use to live, lord? Let me die!"
"Dance, then; and you may come with me."

8

The clock struck ten. And those pale three
Who slept beneath untended grass

In coffins blown of lucid glass,
Came laughing through the open door,
Joined hands, and danced across the floor
To Deth, and kissed him. Madeline
In scarlet gown and slippers green;
Petronilla in amethyst,—
A white owl winking on her wrist;
And last, in black, demure Elaine
Bearing a peacock-silver train.
Madeline touched, ere he could speak,
The frosty sparkle on his cheek.
Pale Petronilla kissed the hand
That held the many-flowered wand.
Elaine was shy, Elaine was grave.
“My lord!” she said, “such joy you have!—
What pleasure can you have in me?” . . .
Deth smiled, and took her on his knee,
And kissed her mouth. Her eyes grew dim
As shyly she looked up at him.

9

“Of all the lovely dead,” said Deth,
“That weep twixt here and Nazareth;
Of all who once had shining hair
But now in dungeon lie and stare

And, if they dream of braiding, must
Consign the braiding unto dust;
Unthinking, unremembering,—
Or stirred by bird-song in the spring:
No, there is none so fair as you;
A mouth so sweet I never knew. . . .
Look up—lift up your eyes, Elaine—!
That down them I may pass again
Into that sad eternal light
Where still you treasure, phantom-bright,
Our night of love, your bridal night!”
She murmured softly, like one chidden:
“My lord, I did as I was bidden. . . .
Would you have less? Or is there more?”
Deth’s eyes strove darkly to explore
Her eyes. “Ah!—there I see you still—
There, as at night I climbed the hill.
Clearly, as in a crystal ball,
I saw you, behind door and wall.
What black dream flowered in your brain?
What wormy vision, deep Elaine?
That you uncoiled, then coiled again,
In the small room, your shining hair?
What made you lift the flame, and stare
Into your eyes so long a while—

Your mirrored eyes—and sadly smile?
Did you hear footsteps on the hill?
And hearing footsteps were you still?
~~Did they come subtly up your blood,—~~ ✓
As there in candlelight you stood—:
The soft, the whispering, gold-shod feet
That nearer, clearer, louder, beat,
So loud at last they made you start—
Lest they should tread upon your heart? . . .
And tread they did; and tread they did.”
“As you are bidden, so you bid,
My lord,” Elaine said; “Flower and bird
Fall down before the instant word. . . .
My hair uncoiled I coiled again
Because I heard your summons plain;
Yet though I loved you, Lord, I grieved:
And gladly longer would have lived.”
Each gravely smiled; and smiling still
Each kissed the other’s smile; until
Their sad eyes closed, as in excess
Of dark, unhappy, blessedness.

But Petronilla, owl on wrist,
 Laughed down upon them as they kissed:
 "See how these lovers keep their tryst
 With string and cymbal loud about them
 And coffin-maidens come to rout them!
 Is this our lord who rules the dead?
 And have his lips too often fed
 Upon the living, that he wakes
 This coffin-girl, Elaine, and takes
 Her insubstantial heart again?"
 She laughed; and as she laughed, Elaine
 With opened eyes stood up; and tall
 Behind her, Deth, against the wall
 In scarlet rising, seemed to change
 Into something still and strange:
 Clawlike again became the hand
 That stiffly held the flowering wand.
 "What Petronilla says is true!
 Go now, Elaine! I've done with you.
 Go mark your victims with a kiss
 And dance them out, while cymbals hiss,
 Dance them down the moonlit street
 To opened grave and winding-sheet.
 In the beginning is the Word!

You, Petronilla, with your bird,
Lead out the Bishop, make him spring
Like a rheumatic goat, and sing
Such carols as will wake the dead
To laughter in their rooty bed.
You, Barlyng! Open now your door—
You'll fleece poor travelers no more;
This night I'll cancel out your score;
Come with me—dance! Here's Juliana
To take your hand and sing hosanna!"
"My lord—" said Barlyng, "I! your friend!
And must I come so soon to end?
Is this, at last, a just reward?
Have mercy on your servant, lord!"
"What words are these—unjust and just?
Sing now! By midnight you are dust."
Deth grazed the angry brow; and straight
Old Barlyng, shrinking, seemed elate
And wildly laughed, his face gone white,
His eyes become divinely bright.
He kicked his heels on the petaled floor
And spun, and opened wide the door.

In wavering row the rout came dancing;
 Now backwards drawn, and now advancing;
 And Deth, with delicate wand, caressed
 Each, as he came, on brow or breast:
 And those, foreseeing, who wept before
 Went lightly laughing through the door—
 Old Trufit and his nodding dame
 And silly son and daughter lame:
 Gardy Finch; and his sweet girls
 Whose small white necks were crisp with curls;
 Juliana and aproned Barlyng;
 The toothless Vicar; and his darling
 Millicent, the spangled queen,
 Beating aloft her tambourine;
 And after them a score of others;
 Fair boys and girls; and smiling mothers;
 And last of all, with Doctor Lewd,
 Elaine; who, weeping as he wooed,—
 Led out in his obscene embrace,—
 Covered with shameful hands her face.
 Then stepped the drummer with his drum;
 The fiddlers fiddling ~~Kingdom Come~~; ~~X~~
 The staring flutist, short of breath;
 After them all, gaunt-shadowed ~~Deth~~. ~~X~~

Above his head the Star-Tree swung.
 The ragged chorus now was sung—
*"Day of wrath, upon that day,
 When (as David and Sibyl say,
 Time, dishonored, comes to clay! . . ."*
 "Dies Iræ!" whispered Deth.
 Upon the Argus tree his breath
 Rose like a vapor to deflower;
 And softly fell an elfin shower
 Of tinily winking stars and moon
 Upon his cloak, and dimmed as soon
 As snowflakes die in April air;
 Twinkled, and left the Star-Tree bare.
"Day of wrath—upon that day!"
 With angry claw he waved away
 The Star-Tree sign, the Star-Tree Inn;
 And laughed, to see his feet begin
 Themselves the dance so deeply learned:
 The dance of bones that beat and burned.

The lych-gate green was opened wide.
 The dancers rocked from side to side.
 Fairy lights burned in the grass.

The churchyard now was roofed with glass.
And down a crystal stairway, bright
With goblin candle and glow-worm light,
Under the ground the dancers went:
Juliana, and Millicent,
And Parson Prude and Doctor Lewd
With small Elaine whom still he wooed;
Gardy Finch; rapt Madeline
Bearing a light beneath her chin;
The Bishop hale; tall Petronilla,
Who loudly sang the "*dies illa*";
Two by two Deth saw them pass
Under the catacomb of glass;
Watched them wind far down, and go
Among the cells, in honeyed row,
Till each had found his crystal bed
And stretched his length and propped his head:
Each with his hands upon his breast,
There, singing still, they lay at rest.

*"Horn of wonders, scattering sound
Through all dead regions underground!"*
Deth raised once more the clawlike hand
That bore the moon-white-flowered wand;
And held its blossoms above the dead.

"Take this! and this! and this!" he said.
With each sharp hiss a petal dropped
In withered grass. The singing stopped.
The crystal roof, the lights, grew dimmer.
And nought was left but a wannish glimmer
Where Petronilla, with upward stare,
A last time, drowsily, touched her hair;
And Elaine lay weeping; and Madeline
Breathed out the light that warmed her chin.

14

Above the churchyard wall Deth leaned,
Counting the tombstones, carved and greened,
In pallid rows; whence slowly came
Those two; the one with eyes of flame,
And she who bore the shameful name—
The golden-haired, who loved her lord,
And the wise demon, who abhorred.
Loud-whirring wings in Mary's tower
Foretold the striking of the hour.
High up, the hidden small-voiced bell
Shook out twelve silver birds, that fell
Slowly to earth on whizzing wings
Among the churchyard whisperings.
And lo, commingled with the ringing,

19

Were heard five ghostly voices singing:
*"The quick to church, the dead to grave,
We ring: such usage let us have.
Who here, therefore, doth damn, or swear,
Or quarrel, though no blood appear:
Who wears a spur, o'erturns a bell,
Or, being unskilful, spoils a peal;
He'll sixpence pay for every crime,
To warn him 'gainst another time.
Let all in friendship hither come
While Treble sings to Thundering Tom;
And since bells are for recreation,
Let's ring, and fall to admiration."*

II: MILLICENT PIGGISTAILE

I

"My lord," said Millicent, "now rest
Your head on this exhausted breast,
This breast that is a ruined world.
Here rocks decay, and seas are whirled
To nothingness; here God is not;
And all things living are forgot.
Dark Juliana, on her tomb,
Angrily stares against her doom;
There, like the robin, leans her head
To hear the whispers of the dead:
She loves you not. Come, lord, and rest
Your head on this exhausted breast."

Under the churchyard yew they lay,
In shade, those two. Not far away
Dark Juliana stretched herself
Along a narrow marble shelf,
Watching, with wide unfathomed eye,
The bat at caper. . . . "Come and lie
In this cold grass, your arm above me,
Once more, and tell me that you love me.
Here, in this breast, all things are dead.
All is at peace. Here make your bed."
"This night," said Deth, "I lie with you:

Our deathless sorrow we renew.
I'll see once more, through your deep face,
The horror huge of ruined space—
Where all that grew no longer grows;
The tomb, wherein the whirlwind blows.
There will I lie! there slowly thrust
Dead roots, to crack that sterile dust."
"Look deep, my lord! And do you see
The whirlwind-besomed tomb in me?
This is not flesh! This is a world
In which no living seed is furled;
No anguished root, to threaten spring;
No bough, to bear; no bird, to sing.
Come now, my lord; and be a tree;
And grow with pitiless roots in me."

2

The sidling crab-moon plunged itself
In weedy cloud. And from her shelf
Among the tombs the demon saw
The silver-jointed awkward claw
Wave at a vapor and withdraw.
The churchyard drowsed, without a breath;
Save there, where Millicent and Deth,

In the black yew-tree shadow, strove
To warm in bone and rock their love.
There Millicent lay back, and pressed
Deth's scythe-sharp chin against her breast
As though to cut, with that bright bone,
Into her heart of hollow stone.
"Now, lord, at last we are alone,—
Alone in all the world," she said:
"There are no living and no dead.
The graves, that were your torment, gone,
All graves at last become but one;
And that grave shapes itself in me
For you to grow on like a tree.
Grow here! Here thrust and knot your roots.
Tower to leaves and flowers and fruits!
God hides his eyes behind his wing
While we perform this sacred thing."

From the dark labor of his love
Deth rested then, and did not move.
Downward he brooded on that face
Below his own, which now like space
Grew vast and meaningless and strange
And eyeless. Then he felt the change
Come upward through him; cold and deep;

Like clotting water felt it drip
Into his heart; there saplike spread.
On the black stone he dropped his head.

3

And now the moon-white petalled wand,
Fallen down from the rootlike hand,
Alone in darkness breathed and glowed
And writhed its living leaves, and showed,
Like a live thing of wounded light
That wreathed its anguish, how the night
Emptied itself of shape and sound,
A horror deep that had no bound;
Within whose glimmering hollow was
An island of tall churchyard grass;
And there, upthrust in dripping gloom,
A black, dishonored, cracking tomb.
And on the tomb there grew a tree
Which moved its white roots rapidly
Now here, now there, from side to side,
Like vipers blind that struck and pried
Over the stone, until a crack
Was found upon the vaulted back;
Wherethrough a taproot whistling thrust

Into the sighing vault of dust
And swelled and reddened and rived apart
The aching stones and pierced the heart;
While hissed the other roots, a crowd,
And fed and throve. Then cried aloud
The injured tomb: "Your roots have found
The core of anguish, underground!
My inward walls they search and scrape
And I am blest! . . . My lord, what shape
Take you above? And do you grow?"
The dark tree answered: "Grief I know,
And feed on; my increasing leaves
Are syllables of one who grieves.
Swiftly I grow! My branches turn
Like burning boughs that as they burn
Twist upward through the twisting fire
And feed upon it as on desire."
The tomb made answer to the tree:
"Queen Juliana—where is she? . . .
Does she, like Sybil, read her book
Angrily,—and forbear to look?
Or does she watch the furious root
That brings its misery to fruit?"
The dark tree clashed its leaves and said:
"Queen Juliana preens her head

Beneath my bough, against a knee
Of gnarly root twixt you and me.
She stares and dreams. Her chin is propped
Upon her palms. Her book is dropped."
"What is it that she stares at? What
Is that she dreams of?" "Things forgot
By you and me. All hideous things.
Root-rived mouths; and festered wings.
Petronilla, whose hair is rotten;
Elaine, who weeps alone, forgotten;
And Madeline; whose breasts are gnawed
By the sharp worm that was a bawd."

4

Five chains of moonlight shot the gloom
Of swelling leaves; and showed the tomb
Wrapt every way with roots, that gript
The falling stones; and slid and slipt
Through grinning cracks, as though to smother
And coil and bruise and crush each other
In slippery knots convulsed. And there
Among live roots that made a chair
Dark Juliana sat to stare
A gold crown winking in her hair;
Beneath her chin strong knuckles folded;

Eyes black; and forehead fury-moulded.
Her opened book that lay in grass
Mirrored the crab-moon like a glass
And a wheel of cobweb; staring down
She saw her knuckles, saw her crown;
And under, moon-shot, swirling, dense,
Swollen each second more immense,
The frightful tree, world-bearing tree,
The tree that cracked infinity.
And now she watched the slow roots tighten
Against the shrinking tomb and brighten
With what they fed on. Now she heard
Out of the tomb, word mixed with word,
A windy murmur, sighed complaint,
Deep underground, confused and faint;
As though, far down, the host of dead,
Imprisoned in a mighty bed,
Cried out in sleep, or babbled words
Misshapen, like sleep-charmèd birds
Who feel the snake among them pass
And dare not wake. And now with glass
That wilderness was paved. And there
Came running up the crystal stair,
Naked and small, with rose-wreathed hair,
Miriam Finch, who bore a light

And thrust it against the leafy night
And "Father!" echoing called, and then
Turned, and fled down deep stairs again. . . .
Then all grew dark. And through the book
Queen Juliana leaned to look;
And saw, far down, a long root reach
And wrap the child, who without speech,
Let fall the light. Then spoke the tomb:
"My lord, strange voices fill this gloom;
Make haste; unpeople my deep womb;
For I am tired, I would be still!"
"Voices? Then let them have their will."

5

Then spoke the tomb: "Thus ends the world!
Now, with the last of roots uncurled,
You hale away these ghosts from me. . . .
Now I am still. Now buds the tree,
That soon will strangely bloom, and bear
A fiery world in phantom air. . . .
Make haste, great tree! And break me, now.
Shatter my vault for bud and bough.
Let the last breath of my foul bosom
Rise bubbling through you, break in blossom,

And magically bloom and blanch,
A moon, upon your topmost branch! . . .”

The tree no answer made. No bird
Among its maze of boughs was heard.
But it grew vast. Its massed leaves shook.
And Juliana, in her book,
Saw how it raged, a world in size,
And filled with thrusting boughs the skies;
Vast boughs that leaned as if to breach
The glassy infinite, and reach
Across the ridgy ice of time
To the vague God who hung sublime,
Like a great cloud, enfolding space,
With bright wings tall before his face,
Unmoving, rapid, rapt in light.
And a soft roaring filled the night
Of boughs. A whistling wind came through them;
A wave of chaos blind, and blew them;
Till buds of planets winked and shone
And burned the boughs, and fiercely blown,
Opened enormous staring flowers,
And dropped hot petals, blazing showers,
A rain of flame. The demon saw
The tightening roots, a grifon's claw,

Crush the weak tomb; it sighed; it spoke
"Peace!" and was lost; a puff of smoke
Thinned from the clutching roots, was gone;
Nothing but powder left of stone.

Then cracked the tree. The branches split.
Ripe moons and pale suns swelled in it
And bore it over. The branches sagged
With heavy stars that blazing dragged
The treetop down. And swift, and strange,
The tree itself began to change:
Shriveled: along each palsied limb
Crawled a flame: the suns grew dim,
And dwindled showering; bubble moon
Burst, and hovered in sparkles down;
The leaves exhaled, the small tree sunk,
Twisted and wizened, writhed and sunk,
In a soft blaze like tinsel melting;
Till nought was left but a flimsy pelting
Of firefly glints on the brow and hair
Of dark Juliana who brooded there . . .
It died, like snow in April air.

Then all was still. No sound there was.
 The cricket slept in dripping grass.
 Nought was breathing, nought was stirring:
 Until from the ivy came a whirring
 And waking wings in Mary's tower
 Foretold the striking of the hour.
 Slowly, the little small-voiced bell
 Shook out four silver birds, that fell
 Softly to grass, on whizzing wings,
 Among the churchyard whisperings.
 Dark Juliana closed her eyes
 And nodded among her mysteries;
 While there, beneath the churchyard yew,
 In chilly shade they stirred, those two,
 And heavily rose, as if from sleep
 Of passion fathomlessly deep.
 "Come Millicent—my doxy queen!
 Come upward from the vast obscene.
 Swim swiftly upward—breathe; escape
 The fetid tomb; resume your shape!
 Day creeps; and Juliana sleeps;
 Deep in her sleep the demon weeps
 For us, and for all suffering things—
 Root-rived mouths, and rat-gnawed wings;

The broken tomb; the phantom tree;
Herself, a part of you and me.
Look, how the spasm takes her face
For dreaming deep of God's disgrace!"

Queen Millicent no answer made,
But palely rose in the yew-tree shade;
Among the pallid tombs they stept,
And watched, where Juliana slept,
And in her slumber shook and wept.
So brooding stood. Then with quick wand,
Gently he touched the sleeping hand;
And Juliana sucked her breath
Opening wing-filled eyes at Deth;
Profound, estranged. "And has day come?
And are you from your wanderings home?"
Deth answered: "Home from tomb and tree.
The day has come." They turned, those three:
Out of the churchyard darkly went
Juliana and Millicent:
And Deth, in twilight, loitering after,
Stifled in heart a rabid laughter;
Insane, the raging laugh of grief;
Hysteria of the withered leaf.

III: THE FALLING OF THE BIRDS

I

"Come birds! Come chirp, come laugh, come sing!
Come goudspink, whirl your flimsy wing!
Come teewhaup cry, come nightingale
And mourn for Millicent Piggistaile!
Eagle and heron, blackbird, lark,
Hurrying sparrow, and booming hawk—
Come, stumbling owl, and blink and stare
Caught in the sunlight's blinding hair!
Tuwhoo cry out! red robin come,
Where Deth's hand flings your daily crumb!"

In a sun-shot flash of powdery rain
Deth singing sped down Dead Man's Lane,
Where murdered warriors, long since dead,
Lay bones akimbo, heel to head.
The spider's trembling web he broke
That burned in air twixt thorn and oak;
The rain-bright wheel sunk softly, broken,
The spider swung, with no word spoken;
And Deth, with dripping wand, went on
While birds above him sang for dawn.
"See how they mount," he cried, "and fill
The sky with flickering wings, until
High up a swarm of gnats they seem,

Waver, and hover and flash, and gleam
And weave, like motes in a fever-dream! . . .
Come birds! Come cry! Come moan! Come rage!
Come weep that heaven is but a cage!"

2

He was in rags; a pilgrim, he
Sang down the deep lane merrily,
Struck off, with whizzing wand, a leaf,
Shook showers of drops, and hid his grief;
While murdered men, behind his back,
Moved tongues of clay, and clucked "Alack,
That Deth must take the harmless birds,
Who have but song, who have no swords!
See how they come, poor darlings, come
To sing their souls out and be dumb!
Go back, bright feathers! Eyes of light,
Be hooded, lest you're clay to-night!
Look not beneath the serpent's lid
To see what seed-pearl there is hid:
What blood-drop stone, what topaz clear,
Or frozen amethystine tear!
It is the stone of light that kills:
The stone that thrills: the stone that stills."
The red sun sent a stinging shaft

Through the wet boughs; wherein Deth laughed
And whirled his rags, to skip and frisk
With a scudding shadow, ribbed, grotesque;
Three oak-leaves tore; one twig was shattered;
A hundred scarlet drops were scattered;
A bee cried out in a foxglove bell,
Both slain in the grass; and Deth stood still.
"Stoop, birds! Stoop, feather-brains! and say—
Shall I come as bird or snake to-day?
You, Miriam Robin, on your nest—
Warming five eggs beneath your breast,—
Command now: how would you like me best?
With beak and claw? Or were it better
With rainbow rings and eyes that glitter?"
Lifting a rag he flashed a wing
And hawklike screamed and swerved, to fling
A gliding shadow. Winged and blue
It hung with sickle edge, and grew
Enormous, roaring, shook a cry
From Miriam Robin, dull of eye—
"Pity! Pity! Not I, not I!"
Deth laughed; and coiled him like a spring.
The laugh became a hiss; the wing
Wizened, and winked with rainbow scale;
By quivering primrose slid the tail;

The eyes were sparkles; flat the head;
Deep the thin mouth; the tongue of thread
Flicked out and in; and, hushed, the bird,—
Lids drooped, beak open,—spoke no word.
Then croaked the dead men underground—
“Sing, Miriam, sing!” . . . The bright snake wound
On a gray-footed ivy-stem;
Dropped head and opal diadem;
The tiny eyes, red seeds of fire,
Unwinking, glowed their shrewd desire.
And dead men clucked their tongues of clay:
“Sing, Miriam, sing! and fly away!”
Miriam whispered: “The eyes are red:
Smiling, they leave the smiled-on dead.
Poppy, let fall one silken petal
Upon the jeweled head to settle!
One petal drop! your hour is come!
Die now, ~~and save me from the worm!~~”
Gauzy-throated, the poppy sung—
“Spare Miriam, lord! for she is young!”
One petal dropped. The scarlet hood
Mantled the cunning head like blood.

With myriad voices grass was filled.
 A beetle clicked. A cricket shrilled.
 A host of ants, deep underground,
 Murmured in earth a mournful sound,
 Sang slowly, rolling grains of sand.
 The scarlet eft, with scarlet hand
 Clutching a twig, and small dark eye,
 Under an oak-leaf ticked his cry.
 And buttercups, like sea-surf swinging,
 Their countless gentle gold-bells ringing,
 Tinkled for gnats and tolled for bees
 And chimed for dragon-flies. Vast trees
 Flung down their blossoms green that fell
 Roaring through air, each clanging bell
 Quenched in the grass. White moth on thistle
 Fanned with his wings and made them whistle . . .
 And Deth, deep-sunk in the surf of tune
 That seethed the flowering sea of June,
 Drunk with the voices, bells, and zithers,
 Passionate choir of all that withers,
 Flickered his tongue and arched his head
 From Miriam's nest and Miriam dead.
 Horned mouth and jeweled pate he thrust
 Through twanging web and lichen crust;

A red-furred spider caught, that trilled
Loud as a fly; then all was stilled.

4

“Come birds! Come cry! Come moan! Come rage!
Come weep that heaven is but a cage!”
Deth, on the hilltop, flung his cry
Hard as a flint against the sky.
In grass he sat. The birds, a cloud,
Darkened the hill. Their wings were loud.
No voices had they—tongues were still;
Like falling leaves they touched the hill;
Winnowed the grass with fanning wings;
Among the daisies fell in rings;
While Deth, unsmiling, never stirring
Amid the fluttering and the whirring
That blew his rags and fanned his face,
Sat stonelike, staring, in that place.
Between his knees in nodding grass
A golden cage of osier was;
Shaped like a bell, no bird inside;
The door of osier opened wide.
This twice he turned. With nodding head,
Sadly, at last: “Speak, birds!” he said.
“Miriam on her nest lies dead.

Five eggs beneath her breast grow cold.
This is the day of wrath foretold.
Who knows my secret? . . . Whose bright eyes
Have seen in the wood the light that flies?
That bird who tells me, he shall have
This cage of osier, he shall live;
Think well! for all who do not know
Shall melt upon this hill like snow.
Within my humming web are heard
Caught worlds that cry. What means a bird?"
Bubbled the clay in Dead Man's Lane:
"For him, within whose net complain
Suns that whistle and moons that die,
What means, alas, the sparrow's cry?
Miriam on her nest lies dead,
A poppy petal hoods her head.
The wormfly dances in the sun
And sings; her sexton work is done. . . ."
"Think birds! Think deeply! Think! Recall!
One lives, one only, of you all!"

5

Tranced were the birds in tree and grass.
Their lively eyes were still as glass.
They looked at Deth. They hunched. They stared.

Their bright wings drooped; they all despaired.
"Come, birds!" cried Deth. "Can no one speak? . . .
You there, Mag Oolie—feather-beak!
You—bloody-claws!—round-amber-eyes!
Old howlet, you who look so wise—
Tuwhoo! cry out, and sing it plain—
Where flies the light in wind or rain?
Where's beauty fled? Where's brightness lying?
Where runs the nymph with tresses flying? . . .
What hollow oak-tree hides her now
Till twilight? By what singing bough
Leans she her head to twist her hair
And stands, with bright eyes, listening there? . . .
Speak, owl!" . . .

Then spoke the owl: "Tuwhoo! . . .
Last night by China Wall I flew.
I saw Confucius lapt in red
Among the brown Cataian dead.
'Beauty is in the mind,' he said—
'Beauty is in the eternal way.'
The lips that spoke were deep in clay.
. . . Rank grass above his bones was tangled.
Wild herds above him pawed and jangled.
The Tree of Heaven pierced him through

With one deep pillar-root. It grew
With arrowy leaves; twelve fathom high;
With massy column toward the sky.
'Beauty is in the mind!' said he—
~~Five carrion crows were in the tree.~~
One of them slipped and gave a caw.
And there I fed. And there I saw
~~A horde of phantoms pale, like waves~~
~~Break softly on that land of graves.~~
~~Rapid and soundless lap and glide;~~
~~Over the wall; to deserts wide:~~
~~Through gorges; among grassy seas;~~
~~By jingling streets; and under trees~~
~~And into hovels and out again,~~
~~Through walls, with neither sound nor pain.~~
Your slaves, my lord! Cataians dead. . . .
'Beauty is in the mind!' he said—
~~In seven silver bubbles broke~~
The clay-bound syllables he spoke.
The moonlight, white and cold as snow
On Tree of Heaven and carrion crow,
Made all seem strange.—The fool said 'Caw!'—
And the rapt carrion answered 'Law!' "

The owl was still. Then cried Moll Hern—
 “Is beauty, thus, a thing to learn? . . .
 No, lord! It is a thing to see.—
 Thrice has the vision come to me!
 It is a golden eel that weaves
 Twined light beneath dark water-leaves.
 By Nile Bank I have seen it twice:
 And once beneath Kamchatka’s ice!”

Low laughter flew among the birds
 Derisive of the heron’s words:
 Of golden minnow; golden gnat;
 And jeweled frog; and silver rat;
 And pearly newt; and ruby ant;
 “And ivory fish!” cried cormorant,
 “Inlaid with gold!” “And silver lark,”
 The merlin laughed; “a pretty mark
 For sluggish claw or greedy beak!”
 “And golden mouse!” said owl, “with squeak
 Melodious, shining soft and sleek!”
 They laughed, they ruffed their throats and crests,
 And shook their tails and puffed their breasts;
 And nudged each other with their wings
 And chuckled throaty obscene things

And trilled and clucked with mirth-shut eyes.
But Deth was sad. "Is none more wise
Than plump Mag Oolie, skinny Hern?
Let Whistling Dick now have his turn.
Think well, poor thrush! and be more sage
Than these, if you would win the cage."

7

Then sang the thrush: "A wasp-filled thorn
Twists from the heart of dead King Horn;
Where, half the year, the snow lies deep
On aching bones that never sleep.
There have I sung: and there have heard
Defiant of my voice, the word
Of Horn, who once a pilgrim came
To Rimenhild, white heart of flame.
She, she was beauty! She has still
On April evenings green and chill,
Blown on the wind, the power to thrill
The agued bones of that poor king.
Twice in the tomb he tries to sing.
Twice he cries: "The dream was strange
That bade the king to fisher change! . . .
I flung my net, and in it drew
No fish; but that gold ring you knew.

Pour me no ale, but fill a cup
With mead; and I will drink it up,
And leave the ring; thus may you see
That I am Horn, and welcome me. . . .
. . . Horn, the son of Murry, am I! . . .'
Twice in the thorn tree shakes his cry;
And stammered praise of Rimenhild;
And a curse on Mody and Fikenhild . . .
She, lord, is beauty, who can make
So grievously dead earth to wake!"

8

The pipit, from the swinging tree
Dropped briefly singing, "Can it be
That beauty is so basely born?
Then beauty were a thing to scorn!
Is beauty prisoner to the flesh—
A gold-bird in a leaden mesh?"
Deth turned the cage; from idle hand
He dropped in daisied grass the wand.
"Speak, Crow! Speak, Heedy Royston! tell
Of beauty in a parable!"

"Ha!" said the Crow. "The silly pipit! . . .
I'll paraphrase him! *Hic incipit!*

. . . When the green damsel, with sad pace,
Came at dusk to the trysting-place;
And saw in the blue pool, mirrored fair,
White hands, and golden wavering hair;
And thought of the seven kisses given,
And seven nights of sin unshriven,—
Of beauty's lips that age with the kiss,
The burning body that dulls with bliss:
She broke her girdle, and flung it down,
And stained with dust her green silk gown;
She looked at ripples, and longed to flow
As clearly bright as the waters go.
She sighed; she stooped; she filled her hand
With tinily twinkling grains of sand;
She spread five fingers in grasses green—
The dark little blades looked up between;
And tears made doubly bright her eyes
As long she stared at hills and skies,
Thinking how once she had walked with these
In young clear innocent daybreak ease. . . .
She dropped three pebbles: they broke the stream,—
The wandering ripples ringed her dream.
White, among leaves, she desired to go,
Like grass to quiver, like wind to blow. . . .
Alas! of a sudden her lover came

And stood by a tree and sang her name;
And she, forgetting her moment's whim,
Jumped up, and laughed, and ran to him."

9

"Ah, heedless Royston, cynic bird,—
And cynic still with your last word!
On heaven's blue stone you whet your laughter,
Your scornful 'haar!'; and what comes after,—
What under, or before, might go,—
You flout . . . Good, brave, deluded crow—
You shall be made as white as snow! . . .
You, little goudspink, chalandire,—
Where's beauty? Where's my heart's desire?
Where sleeps she now?" Sad-voiced was he;
And smiled at gold-finch listlessly;
As one who sees, yet sees not, dreaming
Of secrets dark beneath the seeming:
The speck of blackness in the seed
That gulfs infinity in its greed:
The yawning ruin, in the flower,
Whence Hinnom vale will come to power.
And sad-voiced was the gold-finch too;
And slow; as he in midnight flew;

And knew his flight the last; and knew
His error destined. "Ah, my lord,—
What wisdom can a finch afford,—
Who only knows the thistle well?
Is beauty in the thistle bell?
The thistle seed on my small tongue?
Of this, this mostly, have I sung;
Yet wise enough am I to know
This is not beauty. What may show
As beauty's golden seed to me
For you a mite of dust may be.
I yield my will; I sadly guess
What may, for you, be loveliness.

10

"By Nanking pool, I saw one ghost
Speak with another; of that host
Mag Oolie knew.—Cried Yuan P'ien:
'Alas—among the dead, again
We meet, old friend! unresting blown
On the dry wind that whirls us on
To Nowhere out of Nothing! Speak!—
Before the wind his hatred wreak
And part our hands!' . . . Then Hao Shih Chin,

Poet and potter, old and thin:

"To what can hands of vapor cling? . . .

How fly the hawk without a wing? . . .

Yet sweet it is twixt gust and gust,

To pause with you, remembering dust,—

Long since, poor garment, laid away. . . .

My Teapot Cottage, made of clay—

Alas is gone; barbarians dwell

Above the buried temple bell;

The wine-cup that I loved the most—

Deep in the nine-bend stream is lost.'

"Then Yuan P'ien: 'And do you think,—

As I do,—of the Forest of Ink?

Talking, we sat at tea for hours.

Half-opened, frail, hibiscus flowers—

Our tinted cups! . . . My friend, we knew

The temple fair at Pao Ssu;

The curio-dealer in his stall

Beside the damp Nine-Dragon Wall,

And all his curious treasures laid

On orange silk in mulberry shade.

Rouge-boxes like persimmons ripe

With lustrous glaze and juicy stripe

And covering leaf: a cricket cage

Of Hsiu, the cunning archimage:
Globed bursting peony cups of Chun;
A perfume box by Hsiu's son. . . .
What beauty have we seen, my friend!

“‘Beauty is that which has an end!’
Said Hao Shih Chin. ‘The lovely face—
Tao, that suffers time and space!
Let it from space and time escape—
It is eternal, has no shape.
Ghosts here—what have we? Dead and wise,
We know but feel not; have no eyes
For beauty: beauty is that which dies
To-morrow; but is not yet dead.
It is the whiteness in the red. . . .
Beauty we knew, but know not now—
The ice-white bowls of Yueh-Chow;
And those of Hsing-Chow, white as snow.
Like snow, like ice, they come, they go.
These had the beauty of the leaf;
Which comes from Nothing, and has a brief
Delight in Being; and weeping goes
Once more to Nothing, and Nothing knows.
Beauty is briefness: it is the death
That cries “I live!” twixt breath and breath.

It is the softly taken breath
That mourns "Alas!" twixt death and death.'

"'Beauty is life!' cried Yuan P'ien:
'How gladly would I live again! . . .
How gladly give the All for Little,
And the Enduring for the Brittle! . . .'

' . . . I think of Chen Chung Mei; who died
Because with his weak soul he tried
To make the Little say the All.
He shaped a Kuan-yin white and tall,
Mixing his soul with soulless clay.
Divine, she smiled! But Chen Chung Mei—
Dropped down before her, senseless lay,
Died in his dream. He knew her not.
Potter had turned himself to pot!'—
Thus Hao Shih Chin. And Yuan P'ien
Opened sad lips to speak: but then
The long wind blew their hands apart
And whirled their white beards. 'Have good heart!'
Each cried to other; and their ghosts
Flew off, like leaves, with Tao's hosts."

. . . The goldfinch ceased. And Deth was still;
 And kindly, gravely smiled; until
 The cormorant (head sunk and dozing)
 Stirred from his dream (one eye unclosing)
 And shook a wing, and chuckled—"Krell!
 I like the goudspink's story well!
 But what, pray, is it all about?
 Here's neither beauty, no, nor trout! . . .
 What's this of ghosts, and sunset-bowls,
 Where potters mix with clay their souls?
 Moll Hern's a fool; but we might learn
 Something, I think, from fool Moll Hern.
 Beauty is food,—food, beauty! there
 Is all we know, and all our care!"
 He sunk his head and closed his eye.

"Here," said the sparrow, "speaks the sty:
 Malodorous chords from bubbling ooze.
 Vermin and worms will have their views.
 My lord, last night I fed, at Rome,
 In grass where once was Lesbia's tomb.
 There chickweed creeps, and clover red,—
 Above that once transcendent head;
 And there, amid the bindweed, grows

One tulip lovelier than a rose.
There sleeps the bee at night; and there,
I heard, or dreamed, in that sweet air,
A voice—whose voice I do not know—
Murmuring out of the ground below:
‘Tulips, freaked in pink and white,
Are lifted for the heart’s delight. . . .
Raindrops, pelting on broad leaves,—
Loosening silver from black eaves,—
Fall in the secret heart; and sing
A nameless and bewildering thing . . .
Sparrows—though of little voice—
May make the tired heart rejoice;
Winnowing quick-winged from the brain
Web and windlestraw of pain;
Even in shadow, there may be
Beauty for you, beauty for me . . .
Be glad to think—when we are dead—
Great clouds will still sail overhead;
Scattering slowly, as they pass,
Jewels of rain, to light the grass:
To lift, for other men’s delight,
These tulips, freaked in pink and white.’”

The sparrow ceased, and one brown wing
 Preened and ruffled. Not answering,
 Deth closed his eyes; the birds were still.
 Then Philomel: "To Sanchi Hill,
 Seeing the heavens smoke with shame,
 At night great king Asoka came.
 The moon rose: and the moon was red.
 Then cried the king: 'Ten thousand dead,
 Kalinga sunk in crimson mud,
 And Ganges like a vein of blood.
 The moon is scarlet, for my sake.
 The war must end! And I will make
 A temple here, where men may read
 The eight-fold path, Nirvana's creed.
 Here build a stupa! here enshrine
 The relics of Gautama's line.
 Groves, here; beneath whose wings may rest
 The singing pilgrims; east and west,
 Four gates of granite, huge, to show
 Where everlasting peace may grow. . . .
 Carve in the Eastern Gate a tree
 With mangos hung; and let there be
 The caryatic nymph, to cling,
 With bracelet ring, and anklet ring,

Beneath its boughs; the fruits above:
The Buddha's mother, Sacred Love.
Cut deeply in each architrave
The story of dead Chandra. Grave
The Peacock with his thousand eyes,
Brief emblem of our dynasties;
The massive stone-ends be volute;
And all the rest with flower and fruit
And beast and man and bird designed,
In blessed harmony entwined.
Henceforth forever is no war;
But peace; and rest; and Buddha's lore.'
Thus cried Asoka to the moon.
Alas! what is brute Time, that soon
Must dynasties, as men, devour?
Wise King Asoka spoke his hour;
His dream is vanished; like a flower."

"Often at night," said Deth, "have I,
Under a forest's leafy sky
Heard in the listening dark your cry,
And thought it beauty, Philomel,
And mourned. But, ah, this tale you tell,
Of King Asoka, gone to dust,
With drums and dreams and gates that rust—

Here's nothing, no! . . . Speak now, some bird—
Where's Beauty, Beauty? . . .”

13

No wing stirred,
No beak was opened. Then was heard
The squeaking bat, who flapped in grass,
Awkward and purblind. “Let me pass,
Sisters!” And they with shudders drew
Aside, and let the creature through,
Who, stumbling, fell before the cage;
And squeaked: “My lord! I am not sage!
Yet, used to darkness, know some things
Hidden from timid daylight wings.
No virtue, truly, that I rove,
Moon or no moon, the haunted grove—!
Why should I either blame or praise
My sisters, Lord!—to each her ways.
Yet happened it that last night, dancing
Out of a well, in starlight glancing
From oak to willow, hunting food
From Saxon vale, to Wickham wood—
Beyond Dumb Woman's Lane I found
A cavern, slanting underground,

Hid in a thicket; the beechen grove
Showered a moon-pierced shade above,
Where, all unwitting, Philomel
Sang to the dark. And there befell
That as I dropped my hands to see
This cave,—before unknown to me,—
Venus Anadyomene,
Foam-born Venus, goddess of Love,
Came from the vault, and in that grove
Stared at the moon. Naked was she,
Whiter than shell her breast and knee,
Cold as the moon her fair face shone,
Her hair like frost in the light of the moon.
The leaves about her a sea-sound made,
Seethed, seethed. And the beechen shade
Was dark and cold as shade must be
In moonlit cavern beneath the sea.
She, lord, is beauty! Seek her there!
Strangle the goddess with her bright hair!”

The cage was open. The bat flew in.
The air grew loud with a whistling din
Of wings. A thousand birds as one
Went from the hill against the sun.
Beneath the multitudinous cloud

Deth raised his wand, and cried aloud:
"Be snow, bright birds!" . . .

Then fell the snow;
The hill was white. And bent, and slow,
His shoulders bright with frost, one hand
Clutching the cage, and one the wand,
Deth stooped down from the voiceless hill.
The sun broke forth. The bat was still—
Head downward in the cage he swung;
The cage a bell and he the tongue.

IV: VENUS ANADYOMENE

I

"My lord," said Juliana, "wake!
 The hour of peace is coming. Take
 The osier cage, and let the mouse
 Guide us once more to Venus' house.
 All things, as heretofore, have run:
 The tamarisk devoured the sun:
 Burning, the snake-fed buzzard flew
 And screamed by Fairlight Cliff. Thrice crew
 The roosting cock. The forest was,
 With all its acorn-cups and grass,
 And forkèd boughs, a sound of singing;
 The myriad bells of goblins ringing . . .
 Wake, lord, and come!"

2

John Deth awoke,
 And shook the dew, and no word spoke,
 And at the demon, long and hard,
 Stared, and the heavens thickly starred,
 As though he comprehended nought;
 But in his eyes deep-coiling thought
 Struggled, like pitchy smoke; and soon
 Memory rose there, like the moon.
 Darkly he rose; and taller grown

By starlight carved of granite stone,
Towered above his doxies, bent
A clouded brow on Millicent,
Murmured: "The birds—like snow they went.
The sky was dark. The cold flakes fell
Loud on the leaden grass. The bell
Of osier, that before has sung,
Was shut upon its living tongue . . .
And down the hill I came to sleep. . . ."

3

Then Millicent, who seemed to weep,
Where on a forest-stone she sat,
Cried out: "My lord, now take the bat,
The rere-mouse foul who guides our way,
And do this thing! Soon comes the day.
Speak to your servant, lord!" she said.
(The cage hung dark above her head,
Deep-lodged within a holly tree.)
"Speak to your servant, lord!" said she;
And upward, weeping, looked, and saw
The vampire, hanging by a claw;
Fox-eared; and still; with burning eyes.
"You who alone," cried Deth, "were wise,
And knew the goddess of all blood—

Now guide us to the shameful wood
That hides the torment! Speak, foul moth,—
Whose wings are webs of Stygian cloth! . . .
Speak, and forever live. . . .”

4

Thereat

Made answer slow the weak-voiced bat:
“My lord, your power this osier shows;
As on the hilltop showed the snows.
My life is yours; your will is law.
And yet, eternal wing and claw,—
Franchise for everlasting grief,—
These seek I not! Better the brief
And dumb existence of the leaf.
Who knows naught—let him live forever!
Who knows and mourns—pity! and sever
From the blind sap that bears him, lord;
Deep death alone is his reward. . . .
—And yet, forgive! I do you wrong?
Not over all things are you strong:
And I am he you cannot kill;—
I cannot die.” The bat was still,
And dark amid his osier hung.
Then found the cage again its tongue:

“But you must go! The way is plain.
Hurry. And by Dumb Woman’s Lane,
Betwixt two silver birches, break
The spider’s wheel; and you will take
Venus, who twists her frost-white hair
And stands, with bright eyes, listening there.”

5

The bat-voice dropped. The moon behind
A small fog flew; the night was blind.
And Deth unhooked the cage, and bent
With Juliana and Millicent
Beneath dead boughs; across a wall;
And up the lane, where chill and tall
The wych-elms whispered. Now the singing
Of myriad leaves began; the ringing
Of goblin heart-bells softly thrilled
Deep in the haunted wood, and filled
The night with grief. In Deth’s left hand
Glowed like a snake of light the wand,
And showed how Juliana stept:
How, in his cage the vampire slept:
While Millicent, in silence, wept.

Between two branching birches hung
The cobweb wheel. Against it swung

The cage, and tore the little thread.
Silent, with unuplifted head,
Staring at dead leaves, swiftly came
Behind their master's cloak of flame
The hurrying two; pursued the hand,
Clawlike and bright, that clutched the wand:
And stopped, where moonlight poured to pave
A floor of bluebells. Black, the cave
Yawned at the moon; and moonlit, there
Venus, twisting her flowered hair,
Venus Anadyomene,
Foam-born Venus, cold as the sea,
Shone like frost. Loud in the wood
The goblin heart-beats rang, while stood
The three before her. And she quavered,
Frightened—like flame that backward wavered—
Her long hair slipping against her knee:
“Lord Deth, what seek you here with me?
You, Millicent, what do you here—
Your deep eyes thronged with wings of fear?
And you, black gypsy, all things knowing—
Where, among ruins and starlight going?
To what can copse and cavern lead you?
What weed-grown shameful grave can need you?
This grove is mine. The hour is late.

What brings you here to break my gate?"
Then Deth: "Here in this wood you die.
And we have come to crucify."
The goddess stared. "The birds,—" she said,
"Will blind you, save me!" "Birds are dead,"
The other answered, "all save one,
Who slumbers in this cage, alone.
The bat betrayed. The rest are snow."
Venus was still. Then deep and low,
Angry, the bell-like laughter rang,
Lovely derision; and she sang
"The foxes, then!" and hid a star
Behind one finger. Near and far,
Deep-mingled with the goblin singing,
They heard the bells of foxes ringing;
And footsteps pattered, thick as rain,
The leaves that strewed Dumb Woman's Lane.

6

"Foxes!" Deth hissed. The word was chill.
He raised the wand. They listened. Still
Were bells and footsteps. Dark the wood
Leaned in on Venus where she stood. . . .
"Pity!" she cried. The petalled bough
Lightly caressed her, breast and brow:

The eyelids closed; breath shuddered deep;
She swayed, like one who stands in sleep.
“And are you,—Venus,—bound at last?”
—Over the white face strongly passed
A sleeping grief. The drowsy lips
Murmured slow, in the moon’s eclipse;
The shut eyes wept; the golden head
Fallen forward as it were dead:
“Caught, as it was predestined, lord!
In the beginning was the word.
Hang the bat in the hemlock tree.
Nail my hands. Crucify me.”
“You call me lord, and master?” “Yes:
You burn my body to nothingness.”
He touched the fluttering eyelids. Sleep
Burned in the white god, sinking deep.

7

Dark Juliana above her bent
Evilly smiling. Millicent
Shrank back and leant against a tree,
Hiding her white face, not to see;
Yet heard the goddess, overthrown,
Fall among stifled bluebells, moan
Once, twice, and weep; the demon wove

A crown of flowers, under, above,
Fast as poison about the head;
Venus in moonlight slept as dead.
The palms were pierced. The feet were bound.
Millicent heard the mallet pound:
And the goddess cry; and, then, from Deth,
Whistling, a sharply taken breath:
And footsteps going; and farther, after,
Deep-ringing, rich, the demon's laughter,
And laughter again, with no word spoken;
And swish of leaves, and a tree-branch broken.
And suddenly, in the hidden cage,
With prophet's cry began to rage
The folded bat: "Turn, Millicent!
And see the god's white ichor spent!
Daughter of Venus, turn and see
Venus nailed to the hawthorn tree. . . .
The foam-white goddess, forever young,
There like a bat in a cage is hung;
Death and the Demon crucify
Venus, that you and Deth may die. . . .
Vision of blindness! Empty illusion!
Error! error! and sad confusion. . . .
Millicent, turn! your eyes uncover!
Regard the demon, the demon lover:

See what cruelty Deth can fashion,
Bloody device of hands of passion!
Triumph was dreamed, and folly born,
And Deth for his own brow weaves the thorn."

8

Then, in the moonlight, Millicent, turning,
Saw in the thorn tree, golden, burning,
Radiant, white, a body of snow,
Where veins of fire began to glow,
The immortal god, her wounded bosom
Burning whiter than white-thorn blossom,
Her arms outstretched amid leaves, her hair
Caught among thorns, her white flanks bare.
Burning brighter than moon in cloud
Or lamp in tomb or torch in shroud,
Her eyes wide open and fair to see,
Her beauty burned in the hawthorn tree.
White among boughs the white doves came
And beat white wings against the flame;
Circling and crying, their wings were bright
Against the burning body's light.
Foxes crept in the wood, green-eyed,
Crouched in a ring. And Venus cried,
Lifting once more the fallen head:

“Think not, my people, the god is dead,
Who in this hawthorn seems to die!
Twisting in death, and burning, I
Live in the hearts that crucify. . . .”
She ceased. The head fell forward. Light
Coiled from her eyes. The forest night
Leaned closer about her. Breast and limb,—
Their brightness swarmed with leaves,—grew dim,
Darkened, were lost. The haunted wood
Devoured the goddess of all blood.
Densely, about the hawthorn, grew
A poisoned thicket: where vainly threw
The moon her breaking spears of blue. . . .

And Deth, and the Demons, turning slowly,
Tongueless went from the wood unholy:
Climbed up the westward hill, and saw
The moon go down: one red-tipped claw
Waved at a vapour and withdrew:
They sank, were nothing, and nothing knew.

Save Juliana; who stared at space
Till deep as the world became her face:
She and the world became but one.
Stone was the world: she lay like stone.

V: JULIANA GOATIBED

Then Juliana Goatibed,
Carving the rock beneath her head,
Carved it vast, with hammering thought
Out of terrific vision wrought.
It was the world. Nought else there was;
No living voice; no cloud; no grass;
Only the rock, whereon, in space,
She sat, with dark all-knowing face.
No shape it had: it had no bound.
Mist was beneath it: mist around.
No sun woke there; no star, to light
That ship of granite infinite.
But there the demon (chin on breast)
Who crouched and stared and found no rest;—
From laboring dream found no escape;—
Hewed of the world a tombstone shape;
And then, with deep-thrust hands of thought
Drew darkly upward, out of nought,
The carver's self. Old, old was he,
Old as the world itself might be;
Swam slowly upward, kept a gleam,
Still dripping, from the dark of dream;
And sat, cross-legged, an atom size,
Unconscious of the demon's eyes.
“Carve, now!” said she. And he, unhearing,

Unhurried, old, and nothing caring,
Conscious of stone and nought but stone,
Stone to be cut by brittle bone,
With tiny chisel and mallet, smote
The ancient base of rock; and wrote
Small words thereon: Deep words that first
Glimmered in darkness, budded, burst
Like lilies in the demon's brain:
Then in immortal rock made plain:
"Here lies John Deth; and by his side
Millicent Piggistaile, his bride.
Creator and destroyer keep
Henceforth their everlasting sleep.
And she,—the flame between,—who drove
Their anguish on, accursèd Love,—
Who died before, that they might cease;—
Shares with them their eternal peace.
Dated: heart of the timeless word
Before and after the sundered Lord."

The Carver nodded; nodded; slept;
Yet in his hand the chisel kept. . . .
And Juliana, who leaned to laugh
Above the dusty epitaph,
Looked through the stone. And there she saw

The moon go down with red-tipped claw;
Dumb Woman's Lane; the Westward Hill;
And in the charred grass,—shrunk and still,—
Deth sleeping, but about to wake;
Millicent, weeping for his sake;
Herself, beside them, wide-eyed, weaving
Vision of peace beyond believing. . . .
The birds behind them, in the wood
Still flapped about the burning rood. . . .
"Peace now!" she cried. She dropped her head,
Her mind grew dark. The world was dead.
She dreamed. The Carver and she, alone,
Would sleep forever upon the stone.

1922-1924.

SONNETS

I

Broad on the sunburnt hill the bright moon comes,
And cuts with silver horn the hurrying cloud,
And the cold Pole Star, in the dusk, resumes
His last night's light, which light alone could shroud.
And legion other stars, that torch pursuing,
Take each their stations in the deepening night,
Lifting pale tapers for the Watch, renewing
Their glorious foreheads in the infinite.
Never before had night so many eyes.
Never was darkness so divinely thronged
As now—my love! bright star!—when you arise,
Giving me back that night which I had wronged.
Now with your voice sings all the immortal host,
This god of myriad stars whom I thought lost.

II

What music's devious voice can say, beguiling
The flattered spirit, your voice can richlier say,
Moving the happy creature to such smiling
As the young sun brings flowers at break of day.
Nor can the southwest wind, which turns green boughs,
Or sings in watery reeds, outvie your voice,
No, though the whole wide world of birds he rouse,
And boughs and birds together all rejoice.
Not water's self, shy singer among stones,
Vowelling softly of his secret love,
Can murmur to green roots such undertones,
Nor with low laughter have such power to move.
No rival—none. There is no help for us.
Be it confessed: I am idolatrous.

III

Think, when a starry night of bitter frost
Is ended, and the small pale winter sun
Shines on the garden trellis, ice-embossed,
And the stiff frozen flower-stalks, every one,
And turns their fine embroideries of ice
Into a loosening silver, skein by skein,
Warming cold sticks and stones, till, in a trice,
The garden sighs, and smiles, and breathes again:
And further think how the poor frozen snail
Creeps out with trembling horn to feel that heat,
And thaws the snowy mildew from his mail,
Stretching with all his length from his retreat:
Will he not praise, with his whole heart, the sun?
Then think at last I too am such an one.

IV

My love, I have betrayed you seventy times
In this brief period since our stars were met:
Against your ghost announced unnumbered crimes,
And many times its image overset;
Forgot you, worshipped others, flung a flower
To meaner beauty, proved an infidel;
Showing my heart not loyal beyond an hour,
Betraying Paradise, and invoking Hell.
Alas! what chain of thought can thinking bind?
It is in thought alone that I have faltered,
It is my fugitive and quicksilver mind,
By every chance and change too lightly altered.
Can I absolve, from this all-staining sin,
The angelic love who sits, ashamed, within?

V

IMPRIMIS: I forgot all day your face,
Eyes, eyebrows, gentle mouth, and cheek, all faded;
Nor could I, in the mind's dark forest, trace
The haunted path whereby that dream evaded.
Secundus: I forgot all night your laughter,
In vain evoked it by strong charms of thought:
Gone, like a cry that leaves no image after,
Phoenix of sound which no hand ever caught.
Tertius: my wanton mind and heart, together,
Forgetting you, you absent, have delighted
For no more cause than bright or stormy weather,
Singing for joy; in truth, I am benighted.
Yet, when I home once more from breach of faith,
Love there awaits me with a joy like death.

VI

What lunacy is this, that night-long tries,
With seven or seventy or ten thousand words,
To compass God in heaven, the loved one's eyes?
Alas! were the whole language turned to birds,
And I Prince Prospero to set them free,
Though I should hide all heaven with beating wings,
Still the essential would escape, still be
Unspoken, dumb, like all essential things.
Love, let me be the beginning world, and grow
To Time from Timelessness, and out of Time
Create magnificent Chaos, and there sow
The immortal stars, and teach those stars to rhyme—
Even so, alas, I could in no sense move
From the begin-all-end-all phrase, "I love."

VII

My love, my love, take back that word, unsay
The heavy sentence that confronts us now:
Check Time: and let today be yesterday,
The fallen flower again upon its bough.
Say you deceived yourself—say you mistook—
Say you were angry, though you were not so—
And I'll believe you as the boy his book,
Taking your no for yes, your yes for no.
Christ! Is it possible this shadow weighs
So grievously upon you? And must I
Find comfort in this secondary praise,—
Outshone, by him, in your appraising eye?
Were love magnanimous, then I might speak
Nobly of this and him; but I am weak.

VIII

Here's Nature: it's a spider in a flower,
Poison in honey, darkness in delight,
Disastrous doom that tolls delirium's hour,
The arrow of mischief in the brightest light.
What's love, with doubt's slow venom mixed, unless
It be a most ecstatic hue of hate?
Joy, in the heart, grows dumb with bitterness;
The serpent coils bright rings by Eden gate.
Nor can the eye, or cunning brain, remove
Loathing from love, or honor from mistrust;
Horror with beauty wrangles in this love,
The angel wrestles with the fiend of lust.
Not here, not here, will Eros rest his head,
Nor sleep, and smile in sleep, till we be dead.

IX

Here's daffodil—here's tulip—here's the leaf
Of new-sprung hawthorn in the bird-loud wood;
And sunlight trumpeting at our coil of grief,
While busy murder hammers at his Rood.
You are not all I thought you might be; I
Am not the god my rival was; and so,
We stare, we tremble, hopeless to deny
The chaos that we know, and know we know.
Here is no tragedy, if it were not
That more I love you as you worse appear;
Here is no poison could you be forgot,
And that grim shadow which you hold so dear.
But since you loved him, love, he lives in you;
And since I hate him, I must hate you too.

THE POMECITRON TREE

Here the skeleton leaf, between
Eglantine and celandine,
Harries an hour (that seems an age)
The snail's deliberate pilgrimage.
And in that same stupendous hour,
While royally unfolds the flower
Magniloquent in the sunlight, She
Dreams by the pomecitron tree.

Not lust alone is in her mind,
Nor the sad shapes of humankind.
What ant is this, with horns, who comes
Exploring huge geraniums?
Up the green-jointed column stalks,
And into halls of scarlet walks;
Boldly intrudes, partakes, then goes
—Alas!—to eat her favorite rose.

Not lust alone; yet this was lust,
And lust was that deliberate gust
That warmly roused the leaves, caressed
The lawn, and on her open breast
Blew, from the pomecitron tree,
One ravished petal, and a bee . . .

Into her bosom flew, from this,
The fiery-winged wounding kiss.

Into her bosom. Deeper then,
It startles to that world of men,
Who, in the kingdom of her mind,
Awake, arise, begin to wind
Along the subterranean road
That leads from their abhorred abode. . . .
They move and murmur, while the ant
Climbs an enormous rhubarb plant.

And then it is her voice that cries,
While still beneath the tree she lies:
Maker of gardens, let me be
Turned to a pomecitron tree!
Within his veins no longings rise;
He turns no concupiscent eyes;
Nor hears, in the infernal mind,
The lustful army wake and wind.

He, though his roots are in the grave,
Is placid and unconscious, save
Of burning light, or rain, that slides
On dripping leaves and down his sides.
In his cool thought the sparrow nests;

A leaf, among more leaves she rests;
Or, if she sings, her watery voice
Is joined with countless that rejoice.

What bliss is his! what deep delight!
To face, with his own dark, the night!
With his own sunrise meet the sun!
Or whistle with the wind, and run!
Why, Lord, was it ordained that I
Must turn an inward-roving eye?
Why must I know, unlike this tree,
What lusts and murders nourish me?

To him, no doubt, most innocent
Seems, in this sunlight, my intent:
No primrose ever lightlier breathed
Than my tall body, flower-enwreathed.
Soft as lilies the sunlight rests
Upon my pollen-powdered breasts.
My two hands, of their own sweet will,
Can stir like leaves, or stand as still.

What stems can match this throat of gold
And ivory? What stalks uphold
So lightly, in this garden, such

Delirious flowers to taste and touch?
What pistilled mouth can rival here
My mouth, what leaves outvie my hair
In mindless beauty? . . . Yet, behind
This mindless beauty lurks a mind.

Ah, while the rhubarb leaf is spread
Broad as a salver by my head:
And the green aphid pastures on
This tall green tower of Solomon:
The mind, within my flower's bell,
Conceals its black concentric hell.
There at this minute swarms the host,
And lewd ghost speaks with furious ghost.

There the sad shapes of humankind
Through brown defiles in sorrow wind;
And, if they speak, their arid speech
Is of that land they cannot reach.
There the defeated warrior lies,
And westward turns defrauded eyes.
Deformed and monstrous are those men:
They climb, and do not turn again.

It is to me each lifts his face!
It is to me, with footsore pace,
Summoned once more, they creep and come,
Pointing toward me as to home.
What love is in their eyes! Alas,
That love so soon to lust should pass!
The hands they lift are stumps; they stir
The rank leaves where their faces were.

Maker of gardens, let me be
Turned to a pomecitron tree;
Or let me be this rhubarb plant,
Whose lavish love is ignorant;
Or let me be this daffodil,
Which lusts and murders, yet is still
All-in-itself, a golden All
Concentred in one burning ball!

. . . She sighs; and it is in her thought
That grief so desperate may be fraught
With tears; and tears were sweet, displayed
Here, in the pomecitron shade;
And grief is pleasant, when beguiled
By mindless garden, or a child;
But the few tears are thought, not shed;
She claps her hands, and laughs, instead.

ANNIHILATION

While the blue noon above us arches,
And the poplar sheds disconsolate leaves,
Tell me again why love bewitches,
And what love gives.

Is it the trembling finger that traces
The eyebrow's curve, the curve of the cheek?
The mouth that quivers, when the hand caresses,
But cannot speak?

No, not these, not in these is hidden
The secret, more than in other things:
Not only the touch of a hand can gladden
Till the blood sings.

It is the leaf that falls between us,
The bells that murmur, the shadows that move,
The autumnal sunlight that fades upon us:
These things are love.

It is the "No, let us sit here longer,"
The "Wait till tomorrow," the "Once I knew—"
These trifles, said as I touch your finger,
And the clock strikes two.

The world is intricate, and we are nothing.
It is the complex world of grass,
A twig on the path, a look of loathing,
Feelings that pass—

These are the secret! And I could hate you,
When, as I lean for another kiss,
I see in your eyes that I do not meet you,
And that love is this.

Rock meeting rock can know love better
Than eyes that stare or lips that touch.
All that we know in love is bitter,
And it is not much.

MEETING

Why do I look at you? Why do I touch you? What do I seek in you,
woman,
That I should hurry to meet you again?
Why must I sound once more your abysmal nothingness,
And draw up only pain?

Hard, hard, I stare at your watery eyes; yet am not convinced,
Now no more than ever before,
That they are only two mirrors reflecting the sky's blank light,
That, and nothing more.

And I press my body against your body, as though I hoped to break
Clean through to another sphere;
And I strive to speak to you with a speech beyond my speech,
In which all things are clear;

Till exhausted I drown once more in your abysmal nothingness,
And the cold nothingness of me:
You, laughing and crying in this ridiculous room,
With your hand upon my knee;

Crying because you think me perverse and unhappy; and laughing
To find our love so strange;
Our eyes fixed hard on each other in a last blind desperate hope
That the whole world might change.

AT A CONCERT OF MUSIC

Be still, while the music rises about us; the deep enchantment
Towers, like a forest of singing leaves and birds,
Built, for an instant, by the heart's troubled beating,
Beyond all power of words.

And while you are listening, silent, I escape you;
And I run by a secret path through that dark wood
To another time, long past, and another woman,
And another mood.

Then, too, the music's cold algebra of enchantment
Wrought all about us a bird-voice-haunted grove;
Then, too, I escaped, as now, to an earlier moment,
And a brighter love.

Alas! Can I never have peace in the shining instant?
The hard bright crystal of being, in time and space?
Must I always touch, in the moment, an earlier moment,
And an earlier face?

Absolve me. I would adore you, had I the secret,
With all this music's power, for yourself alone;
I would try to answer, in the world's chaotic symphony,
Your one clear tone;

But alas, alas, being everything you are nothing—
The history of all my life is in your face;
And all I can know is an earlier, more haunted moment,
And a happier place.

THE ARGUMENT

FIRST VOICE

Do not believe this mighty grief
Is more than breaking of a leaf.
Summer can tear the elder blossom
To redder pain than wounds a bosom.
The numbed bee climbs, and climbs again,
And faints at foot of window-pane.
The sparrow, trammelled in tall grass,
Knows terror deep as Jesus' was.

SECOND VOICE

How wider, how much deeper then,
The comprehensive grief of men,
Who, in the universe of mind,
The law itself of sorrow find!
Although you catch the fainting bee
And on Hymettus set her free,
The multitudes remain, who die
Alone, unheard, on Calvary.

These, though they be unseen, we know:
They help our prize of grief to grow.
How, then, can pain of mindless flowers,

Or panic bird, be great as ours?
Each aching leaf and claw is part
Of that all-sympathizing heart.
All griefs it knows; and then knows too
The grief of knowing that grief is true.

FIRST VOICE

Do not believe this argument
Whose rays of light are water-bent!
Alas, each humble suffering thing
Meets, in the hurting of the wing,
As much of pain as it can bear;
The smoke of Hinnom greets it there;
Or, if the pain be more, its eyes
Are closed, the bird or flower dies.

But you, who say your grief is great,
Can still, with wisdom, contemplate!
How can the living know a grief
As sharp as that which killed the leaf?
Ah, when I hear you yield the cry
Of loss itself, and see you die,
Then I will hail that Night in you
Which, as it died, the dead leaf knew.

SECOND VOICE

But I have seen in living eyes,
And under foreheads calm and wise,
Such caves of suffering as shame
The omnipotent creator's name.
They know and see; they feel; yet bear
What none but humankind would dare;
To world's end look, and back again,
And see in all things only pain.

There, in the one bewildered face,
Is sorrow of an outcast race.
Darkness too deep for human tongue
Is there miraculously sung.
Look, how the barren poet's style
Seems, in the act of death, to smile!
He tries to laugh, this creature made
Of pain, and born in sorrow's shade.

Ah! I have seen in one short page
Such sorrow as would fill an age,
And in a scribbled letter known
Anguish would burn an empire down.

Here's Shakespeare—look!—whose heart grows numb,
And his angelic power dumb,
When the one drop of weeping blood
Upon his page becomes a flood.

FIRST VOICE

Do not believe your Shakespeare's grief
Is more than tearing of a leaf.
Tread on an ant, he knows a pain
Cruel and red and broad as Spain.
Starving mice and weeping trees
The hemlock drink with Socrates.
The lark, defeated, knows a loss
As black as hangs upon a cross.

THE QUARREL

Suddenly, after the quarrel, while we waited,
Disheartened, silent, with downcast looks, nor stirred
Eyelid nor finger, hopeless both, yet hoping
Against all hope to unsay the sundering word:

While the room's stillness deepened, deepened about us,
And each of us crept his thought's way to discover
How, with as little sound as the fall of a leaf,
The shadow had fallen, and lover quarrelled with lover;

And while, in the quiet, I marvelled—alas, alas—
At your deep beauty, your tragic beauty, torn
As the pale flower is torn by the wanton sparrow—
This beauty, pitied and loved, and now forsworn;

It was then, when the instant darkened to its darkest,—
When faith was lost with hope, and the rain conspired
To strike its gay arpeggios against our heartstrings,—
When love no longer dared, and scarcely desired:

It was then that suddenly, in the neighbor's room,
The music started: that brave quartette of strings
Breaking out of the stillness, as out of our stillness,
Like the indomitable heart of life that sings

When all is lost; and startled from our sorrow,
Tranced from our grief by that diviner grief,
We raised remembering eyes, each looked at other,
Blinded with tears of joy; and another leaf

Fell silently as that first; and in the instant
The shadow had gone, our quarrel became absurd;
And we rose, to the angelic voices of the music,
And I touched your hand, and we kissed, without a word.

CHANGING MIND

I

The room filled with the sound of voices,
The voices weaving like vines or voices of viols,
And the voices mixed, filling the warm room
From wall to vibrant wall. It was then I saw
The talk itself, the fourfold torrent of talk
(Below the candles and above the fire)
Moving like golden water!

“Come under!” he said,
“Come down under the talk! Stoop your shoulders
And enter the darkness!”

Who could this be
Who spoke to me in secret, while those others
Wove with their spider-mouths the moving water?
It was not the small man, not the tall man,
And not the woman whose long hair of burnt gold
Fell on the talk and was woven into it;
Nor was it that other woman, who blew smoke
Over the golden hair and golden water.

"Come under!" he said;

And as he spoke I saw him! His white face
Came up laughing, with bright hair! He showed
(Turning upon his axis, a strong swimmer
Making himself a ball) how he could scoop
A hollow in bright air, turning within it;
His white arms, curving like a swimmer's, shaped
The dark sphere out of brightness. There he curled,
In that cold chrysalis, secret under the talk,
Carved in the light.

"You! Narcissus!" I said!

And softly, under the four-voiced dialogue,
In the bright ether, in the golden river
Of cabbalistic sound, I plunged, I found
The silver rind of peace, the hollow round
Carved out of nothing; curled there like a god.

The blue-eyed woman, leaning above the water,
Shook her scarab ear-rings, while her voice
Entered the stream. "Nevertheless"—she said—
Leaning toward the golden foam her head—
"Nevertheless I am not dead;
Let him forget me at his peril!"—this she said,
Smiling, and showing the three rings on her finger,
The fourth of her left hand. Her arm was naked,

The low green bodice showed her bosom rising,
Rising more quickly, as with agitation.
"I can entice him still, my eye is quick
As a lizard's eye, my tongue is quick—"

 "—as quick
As an aspic's!"—this the tall man rang, and laughed.
The small man also laughed, and the bright stream
Rose deeper; and I felt myself submerged,
Submerged deliciously.

 The small man whistled:
After the four dull boulders of their laugh
Had sunk beside me, sending up four spouts
Of golden water. The long whistle
Ran like a nerve. It was blue, and reached
At the near end a gong, and at the far
A copper spring. This all four pressed at once,
And the long screaming nerve wound through the water,
While they above it leaned. Ah, did they see
How the blue nerve was grounded twice in me?
"Laugh if you like," she said, whose golden hair
Fell round me fine as water-sifted sunlight,
"Whistle derision from Rome to Jericho;
Sell him to Doctor Wundt the psycho-analyst
Whose sex-ray eyes will separate him out

Into a handful of blank syllables,—
Like a grammarian, whose beak can parse
A sentence till its gaudy words mean nothing;
Yet if I smile above him, ah, you'll see!
Each idiot syllable of what was once
The multitudinous meaning of that brain
Will beat devotion and speak its love again!"

(Alas, it is true I am dispersed thus,
Dissected out on the glass-topped table,
The tweezers picking up syllables and putting them down,
Particles so small they have no colour;
I am dispersed, and yet I know
That sovereign eye, if once it glare its love,
Will reassemble me.)

The other woman,
Blowing her smoke above the outspread hair
And woven water and hair, and the dying nerve
Of sibilation, spoke at last, and while she spoke
I saw the four walls leaning inward above the stream,
And her with the rings upon her fingers, leaning,
And the two men smiling above me.
Venus too was there, and the evening star,
And the inverted trees, and the terror-coloured sky.
Sky, trees, walls, gods, birds.

"Let him forget you at his peril, this you say?
O Alba, what a bloody jest is here!
If he remember you, the peril is yours.
You, then, are only you? this gold-ring-fingered,
Green-bodiced leman? No, no, be not deceived!
You are not only you, this one great golden
Goddess above the stream with sovereign eye!
You are not only the sea-cold marble, interfused
With sanguine warmth, yet pure as the sea-coral!
You are not only the one white god of forked
Flesh, bewildering ever, never sating!
How could this be?"

She blew a round blue cloud
Of smoke across the golden moving water,
(Whereunder in my hollow I sat sleeping)
And smiled.

"How could this be? You are but one
Of all our host; and us too he has seen.
Us he remembers when he remembers you:
The livid; the sore; the old; the worn; the wounded:
Hating the smell of us, you too he'll hate.
Ah, Alba, what a cruel jest is here!
For if you wake him, with that sovereign eye,
Teasing his flesh with the three-gold-ringed finger

Until, assembled, he again swims up:
Will it not be to me—to me also—he comes?
Me, the dead cormorant whom he so loathed
And buried by the sea?”

She leaned, and then
I saw her weeping. Intolerable pity
Broke in my heart when thus I saw her weeping.
Her in blue muslin, tall and meagre, her
The starved blue cormorant whom I betrayed.

Then Doctor Wundt, the tall man, walked beside
The sparkling stream. His face was like a star.
Between the leaves, inexorable, he shone,
While the brown thrush, sequestered, hushed the wood
With meditative song. Anon the youths
Came from the wood and laughed with Socrates:
They saw him drink the hemlock, heard him say
Alpha and Omega. Thence up the hill
To Golgotha they jeered, and with them took
The sponge, the spear, the flask of vinegar,
And that poor king, whose madness, on a Friday,
Burned to a beauty like the evening star.
Hegel, too, came shoreward in that evening,
Leaning above me, leaning above the stream,
Whose motion (so he sighed at length) was only

Manifestation of the dialectic.

And others, too; some singly, some in groups,
Talking a little, or silent. There at last
My father also came. The dead leaf's step
Was his, rapid and light; and his young face
Shone like the evening star, inexorable.

And he and Doctor Wundt together spoke,
Flinging one image on the moving water,
With one voice spoke, wherewith the bird's voice chimed;
But what it was they said I could not hear.
Only, I heard the bird-voice tinkling "peace"
Among the lapping leaves, and sound of weeping
Where the tall woman, the blue-muslined, leaned
Above the river; while the sovereign eye
Glared on the water to assemble me.
"Inheritor!"—this word my father said,
And Doctor Wundt said also. The word hung
Smokelike above the stream.

II

O Alba! Look! While thus Narcissus sleeps
Under the river, and beside him keeps
Conscious and yet unconscious my bright soul!
Look, how the dawn, the giant swimmer, comes

III

Over the sky, head downward, swimming slowly,
With powerful bright arms! Out of the east
The blue god looms, and with him come new worlds.
Those bubbles—look—that from his silver heel
Sparkle and burst, and those that from his mouth
Spiral, and those that bead his sides with light,
And those that globe his fingers—those are worlds,
That bursting seem to escape the godlike tether,
And yet do not escape. Is it from me they come—
From me to me? And is that sky myself?

It was the southeast wind, changing softly,
Who thus, eyes downward, swam upon my sky,
Bringing news of the southeast. The weather-vanes—
Golden cocks, ships, and a hundred arrows,—
All creaked at once, changed on a mile of steeples,
All changed at once, as thus the swimmer passed.
And all those bubbles
Whirling about him, voluting sleekly, bursting
With altered shape enlarged, these were the news
Of another country! These were the fields of corn!
These were the salt marshes, steaming in sunlight, where
The herons rise with trailed legs
And the wild horses stamp!
There, in long brightness, breaks the world-long sea!

The small man brooded

Darkly above me, darkly glowing,
Mephistopheles, holding in his wide hand
All these shapes. "It is the kite country,"
He laughed, "it is the land of kites; and there he walks."
. . . And as he glowed above me, Chinese lantern
Burning with grinning mouth beneath the leaves,
And the pierced eyes cruel as the eyes of the kite-flyers,
Those others laughed: the tall man first, and then
More musically, melodious derision,
She who had wept, the cormorant, and she
Who threatened, glaring, to assemble me.
Ha, ha, they laughed, descending scale of scorn.
Three towers leaned above me, beating bells,
So that the air was beaten and confused.
Through this (harsh sabbath) mocked the pursuing voice:

"Childe Roland, leaving behind him the dark tower,
Came in the evening to the land of kites.
Peril was past. The skull of the dead horse
His foot broke; and the desert, where wild dogs
Bay up the moon from tall grass, this he crossed
In the long light. And in the kite country—"
(Ha, ha, they laughed, merry descending scale)—
"He saw the diamond kites all rise at once

From the flat land. And on each kite was bound
A weeping woman, the arms outstretched, the feet
Nailed at the foot!"

(Alas, how hard it is,
I helpless, bound thus, in my cave, asleep,
Bound in the stinging nerves of sound, these voices!)

"Under the sky of kites he steps, hearing
The sad singing and whimpering of the kites,
Seeing also the blood that drips from hands
Nailed to the Crosspiece, high in air. He climbs
Slowly in twilight to the weeping-cross . . .
Alas, good woman, you no sooner lust
Together concupiscent, your four arms
Enwreathed, your faces fused in one, your eyes
Sightless with foresight of the two-backed beast,
Than with derisive cries and cruel eyes
The kiteflyers come! Your outstretched hands they nail
Against the Crosspiece! Then down the hill they run
Drawing the kitecord with them, so that, weeping,
He hears you, weeping, blown aloft in air!"

Thus the small man, amid derisive laughter!
But it was not of the kites, nor the kite country,

The giant swimmer sang, who brought me news,
News of the southeast! O believe, believe!
Believe, grim four, believe me or I die!
It is from you this vision comes; while I
Dreamed that I swam, and with that swimmer came
Into the southeast of forgotten name.

III

The seven-man orchestra turned up bubbling and squeaking. Harry Frank, the conductor, stuffed a dirty handkerchief inside his collar, turning goggle eyes to see if his friend Anne was in the audience; and Tom, the drummer, with his prizefighter's mug, was chatting with a couple of skirts in the front row. Lights! Lights! O'Dwyer, his bloodshot eyes, looked round the cherubimed corner of the proscenium arch to see what they were waiting for. What were they waiting for? "Hearts and Flowers." Harry rapped his frayed bow on the lamplit tripod, turning his smug Jewish profile from Tom to O'Dwyer, sleekly smiling. He began briskly. The theatre was full. Three thousand faces. Faces in rows like flowers in beds.

And all this, mind you, was myself! myself still asleep under the four-voiced dialogue! the fourfold river of talk! Here the three thousand faces leaned down upon me, stamens and pistils! and here I was the orchestra, a submarine orchestra, a telephone exchange of blue nerves, and a bare stage on which something was about to hap-

pen! Here I was Luvic, warbling, her white arms fat at the shoulders, like hams powdered, her green-ringed fingers making in a fold of her dress that pill-rolling motion which is a symptom of paralysis agitans, bugling

Falling life and fading tree,
Lines of white in a sullen sea,
Shadows rising on you and me—

her pale mouth opening and shutting, flexing and reflexing, in perfect time! Here I was Glozo, the card-eater, the ventriloquist, who took goldfish out of his gold-toothed mouth, and Mrs. Glozo, his plump-rumped assistant. Here I was Tozo, the Jap, and his family of little Tozos, all exactly alike in pink fleshings, all shortlegged and bowlegged, lying on their long backs and twirling purple barrels (gold-star-emblazoned) on their pat-slapping soft feet, tossing the purple barrels from one simian sole to another. Here I was Nozo, the hobo, the awkward inflamed nose with a diamond sparkling on its horn. I was each of these in turn, and then also I was Bozo the muscular trapeze artist, and all the while I was Harry cocking his left eye over his fiddle, and Tom rubbing sandpaper together (wisha wisha) while Mrs. Bishop put her perfumed hand in his pocket, and three thousand yellow faces perched in rows like birds, and a humming marble foyer with gilt mirrors, and O'Dwyer crowding into the same telephone booth with Mrs. Harry Frank (naughty-naughty) and the electric sign in Bosworth Place—

All this I was, and also the amphitheatre itself,
All this, but also a small room, a forest,
Trees full of birds walking down to the water's edge,
Socrates in a basket hanging beside the full moon, eating a par-
tridge,
The young men pushing, hubbub on Golgotha,
The mad king among them, terrified, smelling the sweat of the
crowd,
Hegel arriving on a sea-scallop accompanied by Venus,—
All this I was, but also those four strangers
Leaning above me, leaning above the stream,
The tall man, the small man, and the blue-eyed woman,
And that other woman, whose beauty, on a kite,
Rose to a beauty like the evening star.
Golgotha, the skull, was the amphitheatre,
The skull was my skull, and within it played
The seven-man orchestra, while Luvic sang—

Lights! Lights! O'Dwyer hoarsely cried,
His bloodshot eyes peeped round the gilded smooth
Belly of a cherub, who supported
Chryselephantine pillar of fruits and lutes and leaves.
The lights changed, the walls
Came closer, the crowd was blue, obscure, the forest
Nodded, the blue smoke rolled among the leaves
And nests of birds. The orchestra sat playing

Typewriters, telephones and telegraphs
Under the calcium light
And on the stage red ropes had squared a ring.
Out of the forest flew the songs of birds,

While hid in leaves the saxophone made moan.
Bang! said the gong, and the red giant from his corner
Sprang to the ring, shaking the boards. The other
Rose terrified, submissive, his thin hands
Ungloved, his chin defenceless, and his heart
Visibly beating.

“You! Narcissus!” I said!
And as I rose the giant’s hard glove crashed
Black on the visible heart, and the sick man
Shot through the ropes and fell against the arch
Under the cherub at O’Dwyer’s feet.

ONE TWO THREE FOUR FIVE
SIX SEVEN EIGHT NINE—

the red hand
Counted, jerking. At the fatal nine
The sick man rose, crawled through the ropes, his face
White as a dead man’s in the calcium light,
His dark eyes burning with fever, his weak hands
Uplifted, trembling.

“You! Narcissus!” I said!
And saw again the hard black piston crash
Against the visible heart, and the sick man
Falling backward, on his back, in the dark corner,
Unconscious, motionless, his dark eyes
Wide open! Then the applause, roaring like rain!
The giant’s bloody glove upheld! The gong clattering!
Bozo, Nozo, Glozo, the Tozos, cheering!
While from the forest blew a blast of sound,
Flutebirds and bubblebeaks, Harry and Tom,

The seven-man orchestra, the saxophone
Bubbling the *Himmelfahrt*, the Lo! the hero
Conquering comes!

Lights! O'Dwyer rubbed
A bright alpaca sleeve across the cherub,
The forest darkened, the nodding lilies
Darkened also, the bare stage diminished,
Bozo, Nozo, Glozo, the Tozos, all were gone,
Only the half-dead man, who lay alone,
His white dead face propped up against the backdrop,
Staring, with dying eyes. To him I knelt
While Doctor Wundt, above me, in a box,
Leaned down among the leaves
Pleasantly laughing, and that other man,
My father, chill from the grave, leaned down and smiled.
And it was then the blue-eyed woman triumphed
And glared with sovereign eye above the stream:
"What thinks he now? What peril seeks he now?
Digs now what magic?"

"Digs in his heart a grave!"
Laughed Doctor Wundt. "It is the half-dead man,
Himself, who longs to die; for him he digs."

(It is true I ran to the dead man
And raised his head. Alas, what horror,
When I saw the chest-wall rotted, the heart
Hanging like a cluster of grapes,
Beating weakly, uncovered and sick.
Alas, too, what horror when he said:

Daily I fight here,
Daily I die for the world's delight
By the giant blow on my visible heart!)

Then from the wood arose a sigh of sound
Where lapped in leaves the seven-man orchestra,
Flutebird and bubblebeak, Harry and Tom,
Blew blue nostalgia out of "Hearts and Flowers";
While Doctor Wundt, grown taller, and my father,
Flinging one haloed image on the stream,
Sang, with one voice, a mournful requiem.
"Inheritor!" This was the word they said,
But also sang, "Alas, Narcissus dead,
Narcissus daily dead, that we may live!"

IV

My father which art in earth
From whom I got my birth,
What is it that I inherit?
From the bones fallen apart
And the deciphered heart,
Body and spirit.

My mother which art in tomb
Who carriedst me in thy womb,
What is it that I inherit?
From the thought come to dust
And the remembered lust,
Body and spirit.

Father and mother, who gave
Life, love, and now the grave,
What is it that I can be?
Nothing but what lies here,
The hand still, the brain sere,
Naught lives in thee

Nor ever will live, save
It have within this grave
Roots in the mingled heart,
In the damp ashes wound
Where the past, underground,
Falls, falls apart.

1925.

M E D U S A

Yawning orchids, with lilac throats,
Burning lilies and dahlias, deep
Tulips (the tropic steams with fragrance),
Violets mooned and huge with dew;
Carnations, colour-of-cowrie, sharp
With jointed stems . . . Lord, what flowers!
The glass at the front of the shop is fogged,
Rippled, confused, the light drips through,—
Crooked peonies, wrinkled phlox,
Green in jungles, and red in waves.
Sweet peas, lapped in a pearly tissue,
Glow through the dimness, coral and jade . . .
High over all, in a copper cage,
Yellowbird swings with live black eyes,
Darts to his perch, flaps at the wires,
Fills his throat with bubbles, and sings.

The murderess wears on her breast today
A small white rose: . . . bends her head,
Crushing the stamens against her lips . . .
How can she hear the evidence now? . . .
The man is saying 'At one, I walked
In the Public Garden, and met her there . . .'
The murderess listens, hints a smile

Smelling the rose . . . She killed his wife?
Perhaps she was right! 'At half-past two—
She went to the station to catch a train . . .'
Half-past two! and will they remember
To put fresh roses behind the door?
The low voice murmurs 'At five o'clock
I walked to the house . . . My wife was dead.'
. . . Dead! More flowers!—a hearse of flowers!
Carriages packed to the roof with flowers!
The raw-turned clay with flowers smothered,
Roses in wreaths with well-wired leaves,
Crosses of ivy, dripping moss,
Arums, cannas, and dense tuberose! . . .
All of them dead next day!

II

Figures and figures and figures and figures
This to the debit, that to the credit,
Inked forefinger and left eye blurred;
One more entry to make . . . The florist
Sighs, leans forward, a woman's voice
Quavers 'I went to the porch, to shake
My long-handled mop,—in the afternoon,—
And saw this girl'— The voice proceeds,
Babbles of murder, the twelfth of June,

The girl who asked 'Is his wife's hair grey?'
'No, that's his mother . . .' the voice flows on,
The murderess tilts her eyes to the jury,
Muses; ponders; with idle finger
Turns, on the thin white wrist, her bracelet,
Slips it upward, then downward, wonders
Darkly, at bottom of eyes grown deep . . .
Ah, she is pretty; looks like—who?
Someone, on the hot beach, in summer.
Gloucester: Edith! the eyes are the same;
And the sombre mouth; and the braided hair!
Could Edith have dared a thing like this—?
No!—incredible! . . . There, by the sea,
She laughed, and scooped blue wells in the sand,
Splashed in the shallows, ran and screeched
When gravel and undertow dragged her feet . . .
The widow, who lives in the flat upstairs,
Flushes; flutes 'I had just come down
To scour my kettle; and there in the yard
I saw this woman. Her dress was brown,
She wore a toque of a lemonish yellow,
With small squat flowers. Queer, she said,
He lived—so rich!—in a house like that . . .
Well, it's true, I might have forgotten
The face,—but then, I'm sure of the hat! . . .'

Figures, figures, figures, figures;
Red ink, blue ink, pages and pages:
Columns and lines . . . The clock ticks slowly;
And always, one more entry to make.

III

The murderess, lifting her hatrim, burning,
Burns straight at him! Her eyes are blue,
The young mouth tired and disillusioned,
Worn, as a pebble is worn by the sea.
To think what hatred devoured this body,
Gnawed her to nothing! There she is,
Pale and lovely, a sea-blanchèd root,
Flung to the horror of sun . . . The judge
Rules out the witness's 'indisposure.'
The voice is raised: 'I smelt the smoke
And knocked at the door, but got no answer;
Stooped; looked through the keyhole; saw
Her sitting, leaning, propped on the table,
Her head bent down in a curious way—
Perfectly still!— I forced the door
And saw she was dead: the pistol lying
Just inside the crook of her arm . . .'
An officer brings '*exhibit five*.'
'This is the morning-gown she wore?'

'Yes; it is' . . . The dark green satin
Is lifted; whispers; the audience stirs;
The murderess lowers her chin, and stares
Tranquilly at it; as though she saw
A curious thing, and far away . . .

Noon is struck; the court adjourns.
. . . Will Paul remember to wind the clocks?
. . . He lifts in tweezers a tiny ruby,
(Glittering blood-stained grain of sand;)
Peers through the microscope at his eye;
And drops it cunningly into the socket,
Seeing it huge as a damson plum.
The delicate spring, like a breathing thing,
Dilates and closes, dilates again;
A chorus of tickings, loud and soft,
Nervous and light or solemn and slow,
Thin and metallic, or like faint music,
Teases the air; hung on the wall
Are watches and watches and clocks and clocks
Nibbling at time; spread on the counter
Are smouldering opals in velvet trays,
Diamonds winking with points of blue,
Crimson and saffron, coral in heaps,
A ring like a snake with small sharp eyes,

And a "*lavalliere* of pearls, well graded,
With one in the centre, a large pink pearl,
Slightly buttoned." He picks with tweezers
The glittering ruby, a lizard's eye,
And tips it tinily into its place . . .
Lord what a ticking! the air is fevered
With seconds coming to consciousness.

IV

The 'cello' waxes the worn white bow;
The 'oboe' drops a plummeted string
To pull the cloth through the oboe's length;
Luvic, smiling, struts out to sing,—
With clouds of powder on shoulders and arms,
Emeralds lighting her thick white hands.
He strikes three chords: she licks coarse lips:
White, in the pool of fire, she stands,
Fills the magnificent throat, and sings.
Pearls in a hailstorm flash to grass;
Cold clouds melt in a cobalt sky;
Birds through the thick boughs trill and pass.

Hearing the husband murmur—"Yes!
I gave her a ring, and told her lies!"—
The murderess touches a scarlet cheek

Leans slowly, covers her face, and cries.
The voice goes on: "Ten months ago,—
One afternoon,—because I had said
That I was "through,"—she poisoned herself;
And later, I found her nearly dead . . .'
Poisoned herself—for a man like him!—
Well!— The murderess stares at the floor,
Dabs at her cheek . . . Half-past two:
Luvic opens the piano-score.

V

Seventy fir-trees flung in waves
On frozen grass, to lop with an axe,
And nail to the pole for a Christmas Tree!
The fresh chips leap, the wood is sweet,
The blue edge smears and dulls with pitch;
And now with a hammer the nails are driven
In sharply ascending scales of sound,—
Blows on a great dull xylophone . . .
Nail the star to the top of the tree
Jewelled with small red bulbs! . . . Sea wind
Wails in the boughs, the pigeons fly,
Hover above him with whimper of wings,
Clapping wide wings in white and blue,
Or wheeling away when the hammer falls . . .

The old pawnbroker fawns at the rail
Rubs pale hands, and slides his eyes
Like little green beads from side to side
And scratches his beard . . . 'Yes, I am sure
That is the woman I sold it to . . .
She wore a veil, but I noticed her eyes . . .
The fifth of June: a gun pearl-handled;
The calibre—yes—was thirty-two . . .'
The murderess glares, a fury cries
'How can you stand there, you, a man,
Who never saw me, never before,
And swear my life away!' . . . The judge
Raps for order; the old Jew grins
And rubs his mouth with his hand. 'Strike out
That speech from the record!— You, of the jury,
Pay no attention to that!—Proceed.'

Pay no attention! You might as well
Shut your ears to a thunder-clap!
By George, the hussy was fine! And look
At the husband, furtive and sheepish there!
The rotten loafer! if men like him
Were only given more work to do . . .!
Say, won't the boys be keen on this? . . .
And Annie will spoil the dinner, to hear it!—

VI

June the twentieth: ten o'clock.
The moon just rising . . . Strange, that love,
Of all things, is so hard to remember.
The warmth of a hand, a sigh, a kiss,
The ring of a voice among still trees,
Old apple-trees, poor frightened ghosts—
Gone, all gone!— And meanwhile, there,
Two miles away at a farmhouse door,
A lantern whirling its ominous shadows
Of scissored legs on a wall of mist,
A knock at the door, a drowsy woman,
Death in a question, death in an answer,—
And vivid now as if carved in stone.
Strange, that love should be carved in mist,
And death, with a slow hand, carved in stone.

Blossoms sink in the moonlit fern.
Tree-toads trill in the misty trees.
The murderess straightens, pale and tired,
Smooths her hair (an eye on the clock)
And the voice proceeds: 'At half-past ten
We knocked at the farm-door, found her there
Half undressed and going to bed.
She spoke; was calm; confessed she knew

As soon as she saw us why we came . . .'
The husband hides his face with his hands . . .
The murderess smiles and strokes her knee . . .
. . . June the twentieth, ten o'clock.
Love-in-a-mist, and death in stone.

VII

The floor is sweet with trodden shavings,
Twisted shavings and musk of pine;
He lays the plane aside, and saws
Steadily through the pencilled line;
The streaked saw hums, the sawdust sifts
A lazy dust; before him lies
The delicate blue-print pinned to the board;
A knot in the wood, the hot saw cries
Perplexed and shrill . . . His back is tired;
He stands for a moment; sees her there
Smiling, laughing, far away,
Grey-eyed and pale, with haloed hair,—
Her fingers dusted white with flour,
Her sleeves rolled up to the elbows,—far
In space and time, her small face shining
Coldly and steadily as a star.
Christmas is coming: He will fashion
A box of teakwood, small and fine;

And carve the top with leaves and roses,
And rub with oils to make it shine.
One in the center, opened flat,
Petal and pistil carved with care,
Soft as the flesh of the rose itself;
Leaves curled back to reveal it there.

The officer shows *exhibit four*—
The bullet chipped from the parlour wall;
Turns the lead between finger and thumb.
The doctor is summoned; takes the stand;
Cynic; opened the woman's skull;
Dissected; found two bullets; one
'Undoubtedly caused unconsciousness—
It lodged in the brain above the ear . . .'
The eyes of the murderess rove like moths,
Rove like moths in the courtroom, rest
Profound with mystery; and he sees
The world she lives in, like his own,—
Hovels, black streets, wet walls and trees;
Deadfaced people who creep and cry
Through chequered shadows of day and night;
Wind in the tulips; wind at the windows;
Vagrant music, and pain, and light.
Labyrinths all! and in us slumber

The scarlet angels we do not know—
The furious demon who whets a knife;
The eye in the dark that aims a blow.

VIII

Christmas is coming—time to change,
Arrange new prints and casts in the window!—
What was the one that sold last year? . . .
Ah, that one of queans in a harem
Shooting craps by a marble pool;
Columns, and doves, and a blind flute-player!
The wingèd goddess; the Lincoln imp;
And then, that print that has sold for years,—
Dante (you know,—the sour-faced poet!)
Glooming, mute, by the bridge in Florence;
Sulking aloof; while Beatrice comes
Along the wall by the old brown river,
Languid in satin, sniffing a flower,
Musing, with half-shut, sea-bright eyes . . .
That tinted etching—an old cathedral—
The one great sun-shot rich rose-window,
With dusky ladder of sunlight, lighting
Tiny people and stone-bright floor . . .
And the one in blue; the slim sharp maenad
Dancing, white, on a wind-swept headland,—

Dancing (with arms raised) toward the sea.
And the faun with pipes by a twisted pine;
And the long green wave with glittering edge,
Mottled with creamfoam, ready to crash!

Downward, through this whirl, Medusa
Stares, unlidded, sombre, saddens
Cold to the heart, draws inward sleep,
And slumbers all, dull eyelids dropt . . .
The suicide note (*exhibit two*)
Intoned; the expert mounts the stand.
'It is my view, this note was written
By the murdered woman' . . . Suicide note . . .!
So: the murderess must have glared
Pistol in hand; commanded: 'write!'
And shot her twice, while the ink was wet . . .
Just like her, too: easy to see
How ripe she'd be for a thing like that—
Shoot her, slap the hot gun down
Reeking with smoke, and walk right out
And slam the door as if nothing had happened!—

IX

. . . Judas! if Janes were all like her—
How many men would, like this husband,

Cringe in a chair in a buzzing court
And watch their spotted lives unravelled! . . .
Poor wretch! He did what all fools do—
And here he was, in a greenish glare,
Sprawled on the slide of a microscope!
And all because that damned fool chit
(Who after all was as bad as he)
Believed a passion could last forever! . . .
Suppose, now, Grace should find it out
That he was not, as he told her, married;—
She'd drag him into the courts—to-morrow! . . .
Or if she was half-mad (like this woman),
Shoot him!—No, no, the woman is guilty!
And high time, too, these harpies learned
That you can't revenge yourself on fate
For a broken heart by berserk killing!
Think, now; if Grace should read the papers,
And see this harebrained fool acquitted . . .
My God! Who knows? She might go running
To have her photograph newly taken—
(Venus born from a foam of tulle!)
And buy a pistol and sprint, hot-foot,
To nail him with bullets against a wall! . . .
And afterwards, on the witness-stand,
Confess with sobs,—poor innocent thing,—

How he had come, an older man,
And led her astray!—Led her astray!

X

Lemons in bowls, chopped ice in vats,
Syrups in rows of sticky jars,
Venomous green and bloodstone red,
Orange, chocolate, lustre of lights
In slippery marble, flash of glass
And moan of fans. Banana flips,
Sundaes with syrups and ladled nuts,
Sherbets in alps, ice cream, an egg
Cracked in a glass . . . and a voice is saying
'You mean to tell me,—in spite of that,
And after you knew this man was married,—
You loved him still, and wore his ring? . . .
Although you knew he had lied to you—
You still could trust him?' 'Yes, I did.'
'And you believed him, when he said
As soon as his first wife was divorced
He'd marry you—you believed in this?'
'Yes.'— 'And this ring he gave to you—
How was it marked?'—'From Tom to Joan.'
'Nothing else?'—'No, nothing else.'
'You did not know the divorce was granted

Until he had married his second wife—
The murdered woman?'—'No, I did not.'
'How did you feel when you found this out?'
'I was surprised—but that was all . . .
My love had died,—some time ago.'
'Your love had died? . . . Why did it die?'
'Well,—because he was cruel to me' . . .

The low voice trembles; tears streak down
The scarlet cheeks, are burned away.
Drugged and ravished and kicked and beaten,
Threatened with death—and loved him still!
A man like that—and loved him still!

XI

Pools of pale light wash on the ceiling,
Whorl and quiver and swirl and vanish,
Ripple to brilliance or splay in green . . .
Delicate bubbles flow from the pipe
Voluting upward in fluted silver;
And slowly among them shimmer and fall,
Glide and glisten, or gleam and drowse,
Breathing globules among black weeds,
Vermilion fish with fire-rimmed eyes.
The tortoise sleeps, the lizard listens,

The red frog dives, the white sand stirs . . .
Ah, to pass from a world like this
Cool and quiet, submerged from time,
To horror and lust and the glare of death!—
There on the sill of the court-room window
Pigeons sidle and coo in the sun;
Here, in the silence, slowly and clearly,
Dull words drip like drops of blood.

The judge is charging the jury at last:
He lifts his finger, the words are slow.
'The law says . . .' Ah, who cares for the law?
What does it matter?—A girl sits there,
An atom horror in gravedeep eyes,
Victim of fate that is greater than laws.
Guilty? Of course. But then—who's not?
Look at her there! is she worse than these,
These twelve good men who weigh her heart? . . .

He closes his eyes: the voice recedes
With talk of 'does the evidence show'
And 'if it does you will have to say' . . .
Florist, jeweller, clerk and all
Fade, dislimn; far off he sees
This girl, who never has known a home,

Walking to work in a mill at ten—
Measuring thread and folding cloth—
Through webby windows seeing the sky.
Ten huge years she creeps like this;
Eyes and hands grow hard at the loom.
And then this salesman takes her heart,
Makes it a charm for his watch, entices
The child, half drunk with dizzy laughter,
From year to year, promise to promise;
Now in Green Street, now in Main,
Secretly now in Gordon Square,—
Hurrying into lamplit cabs,
Nervously walking in midnight streets;
From house to house, and city to city;
Flowers and theatres, kisses and blows,
Betrayal, lust, death wooed in vain,—
And life going past her all the while,
Slipping away like the hills and fields
Seen from a train; the man found vile,
Divorced, and married again in secret,
And suddenly—gone on his honeymoon! . . .
Is it a woman, or is it a girl,
Who sits there, sits in the dark, and stares,
Eyeless, searching the jury's eyes? . . .
A girl who wails and strikes with her hands

The monstrous gate that clangs in her face;
Beats on the brass with impotent hands!
Just such a girl as climbs his knee,
And begs for a story—Aladdin's Lamp
Kay; Rapunzel; The Forty Thieves;
Sindbad; the feathery arrowed ghost
Who rose from the coffin, crossed the choir,
Climbed stone stairs to the pulpit, screamed
'Horror!' and he by the waves who sang
'Fishgirl, fishgirl, in the sea,
Come to the shore and listen to me! . . .'
Just such a girl, by the spider caught,
Tangled in scarlet and captive there! . . .

XII

The clang of hammers on purple steel
Dies; and the flash of lilac fades;
As he stands with sweating hands on the rail
Facing the mob that faces him
(Such eyes! They are ready to burn his heart!)
And brings from the dark the two sharp words
That open the wall and show the sky.

1917.

